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JACKSON GILLIS
TV SCRIPTER TELLS ALL ABOUT IT!

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT'S

COMICS INTERVIEW

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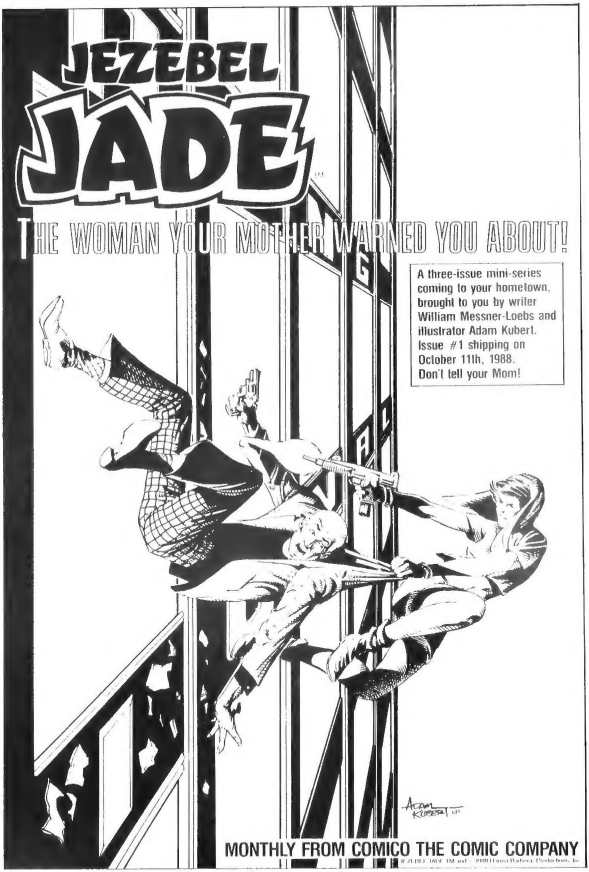
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UP FRONT

Last issue of COMICS INTERVIEW marks my last as Managing Editor. During the past two-and-a-half years the job has opened many doors for me and been a helluva lot of fun besides. The best part has been getting to know DAK and all the other eccentric and wonderful folks at COMICS INTERVIEW Group.

I'm leaving to pursue a new course of work — Astrology. After studying the subject for ten years, I've finally begun a professional practice, out here along the California coast. The truth is, I've begun to get more excited about the cosmic affairs occurring in real life than the ones depicted in comics.

When I was a little New York City kid I never believed in Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny — or World Peace, either, for that matter. You might say I was born cynical. When comics came along, books like DOCTOR STRANGE opened new lines of thought for me, though I chalked it up purely to fiction. Well, after taking classes at the Berkeley Psychic Institute, and practicing Astrology for a living, I've seen with my own eyes that Magic does in fact exist. We each use it every day, only we're not encouraged by our culture to acknowledge or develop these skills. So you might say I'm back in the real world again, but with a new outlook.

As to my tenure here, which began way back with COMICS INTERVIEW #29, I'm most proud at having initiated the "Real War" issue (#53), as well as the "Anti-Censorship" issue (#43), and I'm grateful to DAK for giving me the chance to get to know people like **Moebius, Jack Kirby** and **Frank Miller.** I wish many great glories to COMICS INTERVIEW and all of you fearless readers.

— Mark Borax
Managing Editor

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"I wrote LASSIE...SUPERMAN...COL-

Photo: Patricia Cassidy, Gitlin.

UMBO...a bunch of LOST IN SPACE."

JACKSON GILLIS

Leafing through an episode guide one idle spring afternoon, I made a discovery. Although 25 screenwriters contributed to the 104 half-hours of THE ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN, all my favorite episodes carry the same byline. By and large, those episodes are also fan favorites: "Panic in the Sky," "Superman in Exile," "The Face and the Voice," "The Machine That Could Plot Crimes," "The Defeat of Superman," "The Wedding of Superman," "Around the World."

The two major flaws of the 1950s series were mundane plots — formula cops-and-robbers — and a grindingly tight budget. Jackson Gillis' scripts managed to push the limits of both restrictions. His efforts gave the grainy little black-and-white screen of my childhood its closest approach to the full-color, full-blown fantasy of the comic books.

So I gave him a call. Although the writers' strike prevented him from working on the new COLUMBO TV movie, Jack was busy editing his latest detective novel, CHAINSAW. But he graciously agreed to take time out for an interview.

Meet the guy who put the wry in I SPY, the bumble in COLUMBO, the pace in PERRY MASON and the adventure in THE ADVENTURE OF SUPERMAN.

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Jackson Gillis.
Occupation: Screenwriter, novelist, producer.
Born: In 1916 in Kalama, Wash., population "400 then and 400 now."
Education: Stanford University.
Marital status: He and his wife, Patricia Cassidy Gillis, live in Tarzana, Calif., a community named for one of the many characters whose adventures he has penned.
Novels: THE KILLERS OF STARFISH and the upcoming CHAINSAW from St. Martin's Press. Both books feature Gillis' detective hero Jonas Duncan, a retired cop who is a painter in the Pacific Northwest.
Radio series: THE WHISTLER, SUSPENSE, THE GREAT GILDERSLEEVE, THE AMAZING MRS. DANBURY, etc.
Television series: THE ADVENTURE OF SUPERMAN, LASSIE, PERRY MASON, I SPY, LOST IN SPACE, TARZAN, COLUMBO, MURDER SHE WROTE, etc. "Almost every mystery series that's been on, in one way or another."
Episodes of SUPERMAN (1953) "The Defeat of Superman," "Superman in Exile," "A Ghost for Scotland Yard," "The Face and the Voice," "Panic in the Sky," "The Machine That Could Plot Crimes," "The Golden Vulture," "Lady in Black," "Around the World" (1954) "The Lucky Cat," "Great Caesar's Ghost," "The Magic Necklace," "The Seven Souvenirs" (1955) "The Wedding of Superman," "The Deadly Rock."
Favorite line in a screenplay: "The end. That's the nicest word in the script."

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"With Superman it's wish fulfillment. It's Walter Mitty."

Actress Noel Neill, who played TV's Lois Lane, as she is today.

DAN HAGEN: *You know, Jackson Gillis sounds to me like an Erle Stanley Gardner name. Sounds like somebody who's being blackmailed for $50,000.*

JACKSON GILLIS: *(Laughter)* Well, that could happen. You never know. I haven't got it, though.

DAN: *How'd you get involved with the SUPERMAN series?*

JACK: Oh, Lord. How did I get involved with it? I wrote the pilot for LASSIE and wrote a whole bunch of those, and I went to work for **Walt Disney** and did his children's stuff. I did "Spin and Marty" and "The Hardy Boys" and a bunch of other stuff. I worked for them three or four years. Then **Whitney Ellsworth** called me in.

DAN: *He was producer from the second season on, I think.*

JACK: Yes. I don't think I wrote any until the second season. So then I kept writing them.

DAN: *I counted 15 of those 104 episodes.*

JACK: That makes sense. My files are not too organized, particularly from that period. We've moved a number of times. You end up in television and radio with stacks and stacks and stacks of scripts. You seldom organize it, you know. PERRY MASON is one of the few. I bound mine on that, and they occupy about two feet in the bookshelf.

DAN: *How do you create stories around a character like Superman?*

JACK: It's fantasy, of course. The way I got mixed up in LASSIE was that I owned a piece of the thing, at one time. The rule of thumb for a dog show — my rule of thumb, that I made up — is that you always have to tell a story that only would happen to a dog, and the dog has to act like a real dog. The same thing really applies to Superman. I'm saying this badly.

The example on the dog thing was that for contractual reasons, he had to start out with a show in which a boy inherits a dog. And so I said, "Stop there, and I'll do a pilot and show it to you." And I did one in which a boy inherits the dog, and of course you can't do that. I mean, a dog doesn't transfer his loyalties that way. His master had died, and he wanted to go back home. So he kept running away.

DAN: *And that's how the character of a dog would act.*

JACK: That's how a dog would act. By the time the kid had helped the dog and one thing and another, finally, when he's going to have to give the dog up, the dog starts to run away and then turns around and comes back. Not a dry eye in the house.

Maybe that's a bad comparison, but with Superman the "what-if" quality of what would make a magical thing always appealed to me. I did one about a dream, for example...

DAN: *Lois's dream about the wedding.*

JACK: In which she imagines, when the jewelry store window broke, that he picked up all the diamonds and squeezed them into one huge one. To use his powers in a sort of wishful thinking way.

DAN: *That was about the only time that the series touched on the romance between Superman and Lois, that I recall.*

JACK: Yes. It took some argument, as a matter of fact. Mort... Mort, what was his name? He represented the comic book company.

DAN: *Oh, Weisinger.*

JACK: Weisinger. He was leery of it, because they'd never really gone into it. And of course they didn't in this one, because the whole thing turned out to be a dream. And he was still the clod that he always was.

DAN: *I wanted to ask about that one. In the dream, Lois finds out that Superman is Clark Kent. Was that a sort of in-joke? Were you saying that subconsciously she always knew it anyway?*

JACK: I don't know. That was kind of slipped in there. They played kind of loose with that thing.

DAN: *Well, what do you do with a couple of characters like Lois and Jimmy who are apparently so dumb they can't see past a pair of glasses?*

JACK: Yes. Jimmy was a singularly useless character. Lois Lane was at least grown up, and she could walk around and

"Perry Mason was terribly hard to plot."

talk to people. But Jimmy was kind of baggage.

DAN: *In reviewing the episodes that you wrote, it seems to me that you really did explore the "what-if" quality a lot more than other writers for the series. That series seemed bogged down by a very, very tight budget and a lot of ordinary cops-and-robbers stories.*

JACK: Yes, it was, and it really was bogged down by budget. There were a lot of tricks that you can do now that you couldn't do then. There was no such thing as hand-held cameras that were really any good, and so forth. So it had to be done in a studio.

The flying stuff took time, and you couldn't do it optically the way you can now. As it was, it was fairly expensive for a half-hour show. Half-hour shows were done for practically nothing, anyway.

DAN: *You did more of the science fictional episodes, and they were closer to the comic, in a way. In "Panic in the Sky," for example, you had that huge asteroid about to flatten Metropolis and destroy the Earth. Very rarely did they get into that sort of full-blown fantasy in the series.*

JACK: No, they didn't. And part of it was — I don't know — I felt that I could do it. There are ways that you can do that sort of thing and sort of cheat around it. Some of the writers may not have had the film experience. There are always ways that you can contrive a story to do it cheaply and still not be bothered by the budget too much.

If you told that premise, the ordinary reaction would be, "Oh God, how would we afford anything like that? We can't possibly suggest it or show anything so we'll throw it out." But that isn't true. You can do it. I've been through the same thing. I wrote a bunch of stuff for **Irwin Allen** off and on, just for the hell of it...

DAN: *LOST IN SPACE?*

JACK: Yeah, I wrote a bunch of the LOST IN SPACE and I wrote a bunch of pilots for him. You can do all sorts of things if you're clever about how you arrange the screenplay. You don't really have to spend $10 million on it.

DAN: *Yes. For Superman to be restricted to socking this week's conman and rescuing Lois and Jimmy yet again seemed not really to exploit the character very much.*

JACK: No, no. You couldn't quite do all the stuff you could do in the comic books, of course.

DAN: *You did begin to approach the comics, though. There was "Superman in Exile." There's a nuclear accident in Metropolis and he's shot through with radiation and can't be around anyone. Another particularly good one. In the "Panic in the Sky" episode he gets amnesia and in "Superman in Exile" he's isolated. You get into the sort of vulnerability of the character.*

JACK: I can remember breaking my neck to get some way to make him vulnerable, you know. Because the most difficult hero in the world is the toughest man in the world. I do a lot of writing for COLUMBO, for instance, and he's fun because he doesn't look like a hero. It's the same thing with any show. The best hero is the little guy, rather than the big guy.

DAN: *And that's the particular difficulty of a character called Superman who can do the things he can do.*

JACK: Yeah. I made the mistake with another guy once of writing a radio series for **Agnes Moorehead** called **The Amazing Mrs. Danbury.** You walk right into a trap. It was a sitcom with very contrived plots, and the minute you call a thing "Amazing" or "Superman" you're hooked. You've got to be amazing in your plot every week. After about six weeks, we were going insane *(Laughter).*

DAN: *Another example of when you did that in the series was in "The Face and the Voice," in which a thug impersonates Superman. Superman begins to worry. Does he have a split personality? And you sent him to a psychiatrist, of all things. The idea of Superman in a psychiatrist's office is a beautiful one.*

JACK: The wilder you get with those, the nicer they are, because you can always find a way of taming him down. I like to

A younger Noel Neill with George Reeves, from TV's SUPERMAN.

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"COLUMBO's fun because he doesn't look like a hero."

plot. Part of it, I suppose, is that I'd done a lot of mystery writing on radio. And mystery writing is a great school for plotting, because you have to work backwards to get your characters.

You don't start out with a hell of a character and say, "I don't care what he does, but he'll do something." You start out with an impossible situation and work backwards and say, "Well, the only kind of person who would possibly fit this situation is, you know, a three-eyed Frenchman with some kind of a psychosis." Then you've got to throw him into the story and justify him. Well, it's the same way with a kid's fantasy or, oddly enough, with a lot of comedy shows. A lot of comedy shows have very tricky plots that come back and kick themselves in the teeth.

DAN: *Did you see the Superman movies, and what did you think of them?*

JACK: I enjoyed the first one. The first one had a nice innocence about it. I think innocence is a primary requirement of all of those, and it wasn't in all the early shows and it isn't in the later features. The first feature had a lot of it, largely by using the love story and making it very, very innocent.

DAN: *And you say it wasn't in the early episodes of the series?*

JACK: Not always. Some of it was cops and robbers.

DAN: *The first year, with Robert Maxwell as producer, there was quite a bit of radio crime melodrama there.*

JACK: He had way too much crimebuster stuff, because obviously Superman can corral any criminal. Unless you have a really colorful criminal who has a devilish way of using the sewers or something, you lose any fun out of it.

DAN: *I notice you introduced kryptonite into the series, too. In fact, your episodes were about the only ones that used kryptonite.*

JACK: They had done it in the comic books. I think **Mort Weisinger** told me about it in the comic books, and I thought, "Gee, why not use it in these? Let's play around with kryptonite." You had some threat against him, and you give him more of an obstacle to overcome.

DAN: *A couple of episodes are somewhat ironic in retrospect. In "The Machine That Could Plot Crimes," you have a "mechanical brain" that figures out Superman's identity, which of course anticipated computers...*

JACK: Yeah. I still don't understand computers.

DAN: *I don't know if you remember it, but in "Superman in Exile," after he stops the nuclear pile from blowing up, he delivers a little lecture to the scientists that is really somewhat eerie now. He says, "This is new, and you don't know how to control it." And he's rather stern with them. Looking back now, that takes on a very strange quality coming from 1953...*

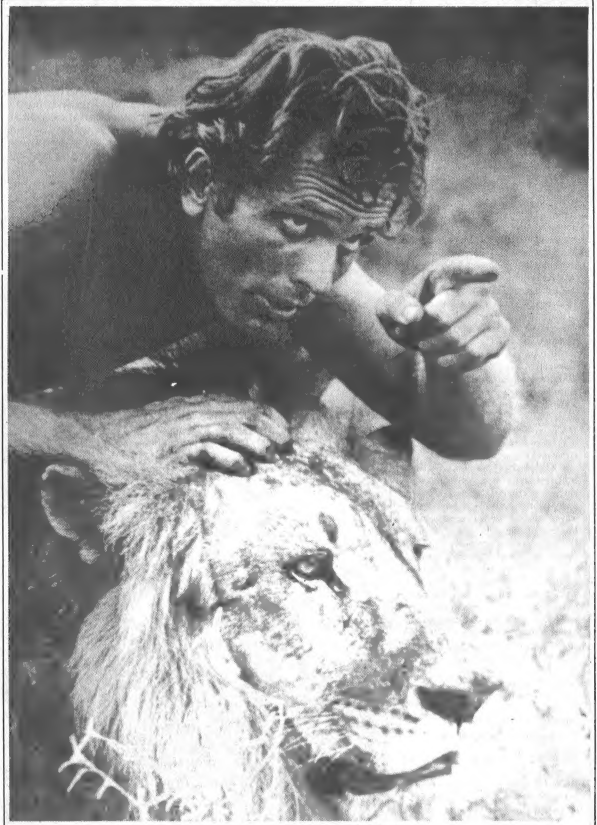
JACK: I had some rather strong feelings about that, even then. I was a colonel in the Army, an intelligence officer with G-2, 7th Division. I'd been all over the Pacific. I was in the Philippines and Okinawa in the war, and then I was advisor to the military governor in Korea after the war, so I was kind of next to a lot of planning that was going on. I was preparing, of course, to go in on the invasion of Japan at the time the bomb was dropped. I flew over Nagasaki and Hiroshima a couple of times before I came back, and it was absolutely incredible to look at. It impressed the hell out of me.

Of course, I knew a lot of people in the Air Force, and I was highly aware of the Air Force belief in the invincibility of bombs. The Air Force felt that it wouldn't be necessary to invade Europe, that the Air Force could just bomb Germany out of existence. And of course, Germany's production increased. And we're still doing it. We're still saying that we have to build all this junk. So I wouldn't say that I'm a horrendous pacifist, but I certainly am a relative one. And I was at that time. I felt that it was a terrible mistake that we'd made.

DAN: *It's still a good speech, and it's a surprise to hear it coming out of Superman's mouth in 1953. You ought to look at those old episodes again sometime.*

JACK: I'd like to. I'm threatening to

"Jimmy was a singularly useless character."



"The minute you call a thing 'Superman' you're hooked."

move, and if I do that means I've got to clean out the garage and all those old boxes of scripts. I keep intending to go to the library school at one of the universities and say, "Send me a kid who wants to earn money and sort out this stuff for me."

DAN: *From what you said before, I take it that the "Around the World" episode — the one with the little blind girl — is the most popular?*

JACK: I think it's the one that the most people seem to remember. I don't know why.

DAN: *It's a sweet story. They did that one in the comic book, too. I think that was one of the ones they actually adapted.*

JACK: Yeah. The comic book began to rip them off. This was before the Writers' Guild was beginning to get after that kind of stuff.

DAN: *You didn't have some sort of subsidary rights clause?*

JACK: No. In those days, the Writers' Guild wasn't nearly as strong as it is now. It didn't in that case, but the usual fear is that it limits the value of the original. Because if it was flooded all over comic books, then the rerun value of the movie is lost, because it makes the movie look like it's a copy of the comic book.

DAN: *What about the money? I'm sure it's a lot better now than it used to be. When you were writing SUPERMAN, that wasn't very big bucks, I suppose?*

JACK: Three or four or five hundred dollars, something like that.

DAN: *So how were you living in those days?*

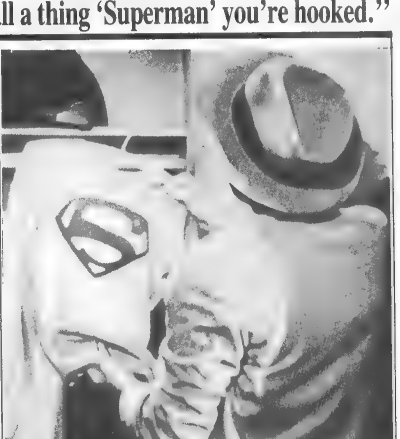
JACK: Well, you wrote a lot of them. Now, if you're a freelance writer, you're lucky if you have three or four assignments a year. But you get a lot of money for those three or four. And you also waste a lot of time.

In those days, a lot more was done and it was done by fewer people. I don't mean fewer writers, but there weren't layers of production companies and networks and 14-year-old executives and all this stuff that they have now. So you didn't have to write an outline 10 times before you wrote a screenplay. In those days, you went and told the guy a story at lunch and then sat down and wrote the screenplay.

DAN: *What does a writer do on writers' strike? Nobody can actually stop you from writing.*

JACK: *(Laughter)* Well, you're not supposed to be writing. I've had a book to edit, and of course that isn't covered by the writers' strike.

DAN: *So you just sort of switch to projects outside the industry.*



JACK: Yes. Like every writer, I'm making notes for ideas that I might use for various purposes later. The reason for the no-writing thing is so the producers don't feel that, "He's going to be working on it anyway." If that's the case, then...

DAN: *They gotcha.*

JACK: Yes. Some people just take off for vacation, but I happened to have too many other things I had to do in town.

DAN: *What was it like, working on SUPERMAN?*

JACK: It was an agreeable place. **Whitney Ellsworth** was probably the best narrator of jokes I've ever known. It was always fun to have lunch with him.

DAN: *Did you know the actors very well, or do you ever know the actors very well?*

JACK: Not particularly. I knew **George Reeves,** of course.

DAN: *I'm interested in what the relationship between screenwriter and actor is.*

JACK: Usually it's sort of nil. Usually a screenwriter stays away from the stage. Every time I've been in charge of the scripts, like on a show like PERRY MASON, I've intentionally stayed away from the set.

DAN: *Because the actors want to buttonhole you?*

JACK: The actors want to buttonhole you and say, "Hey, suppose you could do something with this?" You end up wasting horrendous amounts of time. On PERRY MASON, I hired a guy as an assistant actually — a diplomatic sort of guy. When they ran into something on the set that they couldn't shoot, that had to be rewritten, he'd go over to the set and do it. So he kept up the contact with **Ray Burr** and the rest of them.

DAN: *Were there things you would have liked to have done with the SUPERMAN series that you couldn't do?*

JACK: Oh. I think endlessly. That's true of any series, but in particular one like that. "It's a shame we can't have one in the arctic...

DAN: *Potentially you could have gone anywhere, given the character.*

JACK: Given the character, you could have done all sorts of things. **Steve Shagan** is a friend of mine. When he did the TARZAN series years ago, I wrote a whole bunch of those. They were simply fun because he shot them in Mexico. I did some two-parters, you know, with thousands of natives. It was sort of fun

"You couldn't quite do all the stuff

because you could pull out the stops. Well, you couldn't on the SUPERMAN show. So you were always bound by that little troupe.

Television was taken over by the movie people immediately when it came out, and they insisted on absolute realism. If it was Kansas City, the drug store had to have Kansas City Drugstore on it. It it was 1928, the cars had to be 1928 because the worst thing that could happen would be that somebody would say, "My god, there's an anachronism." Radio at the same time, particularly in England, was using imagination with fantastic results. The best writing that was done in England for many years was in radio. All the big radio writers turned into the new wave of playwrights. Some of that has rubbed off on the television that is done in England, which is far ahead of what we do. They still insist on that realism, but they find ways to branch out a little bit.

DAN: *So the problem for you doing the SUPERMAN series was to try to think, "What's the wildest thing I can do and still do it on a very tight budget."*

JACK: Yes. But I always thought you could lick almost all those problems. I don't remember enormous frustration because there were wonderful stories that you couldn't possibly do. You could adapt them.

DAN: *Did you think they'd still be airing 30 years later?*

JACK: No. And I wish I'd had residuals.

DAN: *What's the staying power of the character, do you think?*

JACK: I'd have to go back to classical literature, but I think he's one of many superior heroes who can do anything. There are all sorts of them in children's literature. Also, of course, with Superman it's the wish fulfillment. If I were meek and mild-mannered Clark Kent, I could take off my shirt and be somebody else and wouldn't that be great? It's the Walter Mitty thing. So I don't think it's surprising at all that Superman has hung on for a long, long time.

DAN: *What about the plotting for mysteries? How on earth do you come up with a plot for COLUMBO or PERRY MASON?*

JACK: Well, that's a good question, because I know hardly anybody who can do it. It's very, very hard.

DAN: *In a way, I think COLUMBO would be more difficult even than other mystery stories because you've got to do the ingenious plot up front and show it to the audience, and then you've got the unraveling of the ingenious plot.*

JACK: And then also we bring changes into that. We cheat a little bit. You think you're seeing the killer's entire plot. What you're seeing is maybe only half of it. So it may backfire on you later on.

PERRY MASON was another one that was terribly hard to plot, for the simple reason that you had to have an innocent person who was justifiably charged with murder. The ones they're doing now are really not quite the same format as the old show. But on the old show, you had to have that story, then you had to have another two or three logical suspects who also were capable and present. So you had to have the prosecution case and the defense case, and then the true case. So you had 10 stories going at once.

DAN: *How do you go about writing dialogue for particular characters? Are there keys to the character that you look for?*

JACK: Dialogue is how people think. A lot of people get hung up on words, and shouldn't. Obviously various characters don't use certain words, but basically what makes good dialogue is the accuracy of the thought. If a man is a redneck, he's going to continue that attitude in all sorts of things, from his choice of words to how he spits. I think you have no trouble writing dialogue if you concentrate on how the people are thinking, and just let the dialogue take care of itself.

If you're a dramatic writer, you want to know what it's going to sound like, what it's going to look like. In screenwriting, you're thinking of it in several dimensions at the same time. And what the exact word is is secondary to the action or the movement or something else.

DAN: *Dramatic writing seems to me to be the most challenging form of fiction writing, because it's the most restrictive.*

you do in the comic books, of course."

That never bothered you?

JACK: It doesn't bother me. Of course, I started out acting and doing some directing and doing some teaching in the drama department at Stanford. You sort of are at home in the media. I never found it terribly difficult. I know it bothers a lot of writers who've written mostly for magazines or for books.

I think it's a matter of how you see a story. If you see it in dramatic terms, I think it's fairly easy to limit the numbers of characters. You pull it down to a point where you can understand them all. I hate a novel in which the novelist uses no restraint on the number of characters that he throws in, when he could lose half of them for the simple reason that very few people read a novel at one sitting. If you pick it up three days later, who the hell is he? Which was this guy? That gets very irritating, and I think it spoils a lot of the effectiveness.

DAN: *David Anthony Kraft, the publisher of COMICS INTERVIEW, once met Leigh Brackett, who was also a screenwriter. She told him that one of the problems is that you have to get in a certain amount of exposition to tell the audience the back story and what's going on off-stage, but you can't have it sound like exposition.*

JACK: That takes quite a bit of experience to handle, the business of planting all the stuff you have to plant and gracefully establishing that Aunt Nellie is really nuts and up in the closet. That takes quite a bit of skill. It's challenging in many ways, but I'm not sure it's more difficult. I sweat a lot more over a novel than I do over a screenplay.

I hate to write a very, very complete outline of a screenplay. First of all, you go through the same creative thing twice and in two media. So you've sort of shot your wad when you've written a very complete outline. But secondly, the way that you make a thing graceful about planting what's wrong with Aunt Nellie in an outline is far different from the way that you may do it in a screenplay.

For instance, an old trick in any form of dramatic writing is, if you're going to have a coincidence, put it on page one and nobody will ask any questions. If you put it on a later page, they'll say, "Oh, come on." But if you set it on page one and base the story on it, you can get away with it. You walk right into it and say, "That's a hell of an opening," never stopping to think that it's the most impossible thing that could happen. **Hitchcock** was a master at doing that.

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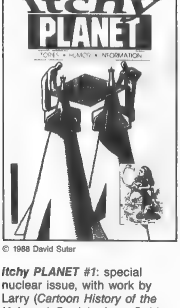

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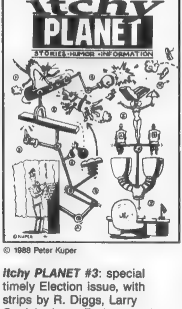

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ELFQUEST: "We didn't think about the future."

WENDY & RICHARD PINI

With comics speciality stores seemingly everywhere, stocking hundreds of titles published by scores of companies, it may seem hard for newcomers to the field to believe that merely ten years ago, the state of comics was very different indeed. Back then the direct sales market was still in its initial stages, and there was only a handful of comics being published specifically for that market. The multit 3e of "independent" comics publishers of today did not yet exist.

But 1978 was a landmark years in the history of independent comics publishing, for it saw not only the launching of Eclipse Comics but also the debut of Wendy and Richard Pini's creation, ELFQUEST. Since then, ELFQUEST has become one of the great success stories of the independent comics field, published as a black-and-white magazine by the Pini's own WaRP Graphics, reprinted as a color comic by Epic, and reissued in graphic novel form by Donning/Starblaze and now by the Pinis' Father Tree Press, and as an Epic Comic series, as well. It has given rise to the BLOOD OF TEN CHIEFS stories and the current ELFQUEST sequel, SIEGE ON BLUE MOUNTAIN, and ELFQUEST's success made possible the launching of the line of magazines now being published by Apple Comics.

This April I interviewed the Pinis at a Manhattan restaurant (in between interruptions by an unusually attentive waiter, a few of which we've included in the transcript), to obtain their views as to why ELFQUEST has achieved so much success over the years and what they see lying ahead for the series in the future.

PETER SANDERSON: *So, did you have any idea getting started what ELFQUEST's status would be like ten years later?*

WENDY PINI: Absolutely not.

RICHARD PINI: Actually I don't think either one of us gave a second thought to what we might be doing ten years later.

WENDY: Really, we just wanted to get an issue out. *(Laughter.)*

RICHARD: The trials and tribulations of getting the first issue out were so all encompassing, all involving, that we didn't think about the future. It was really from one issue to the next.

All art accompanying this interview is © 1986 WaRP Graphics, Inc./ Apple Press Inc., unless otherwise noted.

"We've learned a few things in ten years."

WENDY: We used to have terrible fights because Richard would say, "ELFQUEST is *never* going to support us, we always have to have some income to fall back on." That was around about issue #4 I think. There was some bone of contention then as to whether we would ever be able to make a living off of it or not.
RICHARD: Well, I was probably *concerned* about making the leap to total financial independence. *(Laughter.)* Not knowing what the market was like, not knowing what our audience was like, not knowing what our sales were going to be like —
WENDY: The market wasn't *definable* back then. We were creating a market as we went along.
RICHARD: It's true. If you think about it, in 1977 what *was* the market? It wasn't.
WENDY: Yeah.
RICHARD: **Bud Plant** was trying to do a few things with FIRST KINGDOM, and **Mike Friedrich** was trying to do a few things with STAR*REACH.
WENDY: And undergrounds were just starting to die.
RICHARD: Undergrounds were more or less moribund.
PETER: *CEREBUS was starting around then.*
RICHARD: CEREBUS started at the same time, and I think it was really those two titles [CEREBUS and ELFQUEST] that helped, at least for the first three or four years, define the alternative comics market, which we now call the independent comics market
WENDY: FIRST KINGDOM has to have credit as being first, but there was always a bit of a struggle with that.
RICHARD: There was an interesting little bit of exposition by **Mark Evanier** on CompuServe regarding who was first, and he very masterfully in about two paragraphs demonstrated — *(Dinners served.)* Oh, that looks good. Ten years ago I had no idea I'd be sitting in a New York restaurant eating ox tongue.
PETER: *Just one of the perks of success.* (Laughter.)
RICHARD: Where was I? **Mark Evanier** expostulated on who was first, and he managed to demonstrate very succinctly that depending upon how you look at it, what your criteria are, any one of a number of publications could have been *either* the last underground or the first independent, or both or neither.
WENDY: Right.
PETER: *So ELFQUEST is either the last underground or the first independent?*
RICHARD: No. Mark was not really naming names, though he talked about Eclipse some and he talked about Star*Reach some and he talked about Pacific some. He didn't talk about ELFQUEST or CEREBUS or FIRST KINGDOM at all, and I have a feeling that *those* titles have more or less gotten lost in the historical shuffle.
WENDY: M-hm.
RICHARD: Pacific made a big splash in 1981 because they were the first to come

New cover painting by Wendy for Book Two: THE FORBIDDEN GROVE.

© 1988 Jack Katz

"I describe Elfquest as a soap with pointed ears."

out with color comics, so they were the first to compete at least superficially with Marvel and DC. And then First Comics happened, and Comico got big. I think what happened from 1977 to about 1981 has been overlooked because ELFQUEST and FIRST KINGDOM and CEREBUS never *looked* enough like what people thought of as comics to make that kind of impression.

WENDY: They were all very quirky individual visions and were not trying to cater to a particular market. They didn't even *know* what market existed out there.

RICHARD: And in a sense I think it was a collaborative effort there, too. These books were what their creators wanted them to be, and the market shaped itself *around* them.

WENDY: And they all have something in common in that the mainstream companies told all three titles, I think even FIRST KINGDOM, that they weren't commercially viable.

RICHARD: I don't know if **Dave Sim** ever went to Marvel or DC —

PETER: *He went to Star*Reach.*

RICHARD: He did?

WENDY: M-hm.

RICHARD: Okay, then there is a similarity there.

PETER: *Do you think that in terms of material or in terms of tone ELFQUEST had any influence on other comics creators, other comics works, or has it remained a thing unto itself, and if so why?*

WENDY: I think it was yourself in an article in MARVEL AGE. Didn't you do an article in MARVEL AGE about the upcoming Epic reprints, or MARVEL FANFARE or something like that?

PETER: *For MARVEL AGE but that was a few years ago.*

WENDY: Well, at some point in that article, as I recall, you said ELFQUEST had done for elves and fantasy creatures essentially what **Stan Lee** had done with superheroes, which was to introduce soap opera and get people very involved with the characters, and that's what kept the audience coming back. I thought that was an incredibly astute observation. I often like to describe ELFQUEST as a soap opera with pointed ears. I think the strongest influence ELFQUEST has had on the comics is more in the attitude of creators who go, "Well, *they* did it, so can I." We have gotten so many letters and so many comments from people saying, "You inspired me." If the writing style or drawing style has been picked up by anybody, I really don't know of it, but I certainly do think the drawing style has been copied.

One example of the earliest examples of Mike Friedrich's "above underground" publication... Star*Reach #3 (art by Frank Brunner).

RICHARD: I'll go further. The question was has ELFQUEST inspired anyone in tone —

PETER: *In subject matter or tone.*

RICHARD: There are a number of publications that would *like* to have followed in ELFQUEST's footsteps in those areas. There have been a few fantasy, and particularly elf-fantasy, titles since ELFQUEST appeared, but I don't think that there is a comic being done today —

WENDY: Out comes the publicist now.

RICHARD: No, I believe this in my *heart*. I don't think that there is a comic that is as *loved* as ELFQUEST. Someone might make the point that X-MEN has a lot of fans, there are a lot of people who are very involved with the X-Men, or the Teen Titans, but that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about *loved* in the sense of the love you might feel within a family; a much deeper emotional bonding with, as strange as it may sound, with a comic book.

PETER: *People admire WATCHMEN, for example, but they don't love it in that sense.*

RICHARD: Exactly. You can admire, you can respect, you can go wild over, you can hate —

PETER: *But you don't feel the same kind of warmth for the characters.*

RICHARD: Exactly. I do not know of another comic that has garnered that kind of response. I'm not talking about *numbers*

© 1975 Star*Reach/Frank Brunner

"The artist has his P.O.V. and his

of readers. I'm talking about the type and the intensity of that response.

WENDY: Well, there isn't another comic that's as militantly soft and squashy and feminine as ELFQUEST is. *(Laughter.)* I think that kind of inspires that feeling of warmth, creates warmth in the readers — at least it does in the male readers.

PETER: *I was thinking of something else, that perhaps this is something like the attachment STAR TREK fans have for the characters of the show.*

WENDY: Oh, yes.

PETER: *It's not a feminine or a masculine aspect to the work, it's just something that creates empathy for the characters. And I'm wondering if this is true then what is it that keeps other comics from engendering this kind of feeling for the characters?*

WENDY: Well, it probably has to do with the creators' approach. If you love your characters, if you're bonded to them, if you're characters are a little bit of a part of you, then that is going to come through. People are so smart and so sensitive that they pick up on that and they feel it.

PETER: *I wonder if it has to do with the kind of presentation. Perhaps the comics that don't get this kind of response have the emphasis too much on the adventure and not on, say, the more likeable side of the characters?*

RICHARD: Let's look at the two most similar examples from the mainstream comics, X-MEN and TEEN TITANS, in comparison to ELFQUEST. Both of these comics —

WENDY: Have 50,000 characters. *(Laughter.)*

RICHARD: Both of these titles involve a lot of characters, they both involve ostensibly youthful characters with whom youthful readers can identify, and they do involve a certain mix of adventure, emotional situations —

WENDY: Lots of soap opera.

RICHARD: Angst

WENDY: But you know what the difference is? I feel that I know the difference.

PETER: *Yes?*

WENDY: On these books there are a writer and an artist working separately. The writer has his point of view and his part flows through his words. The artist has his point of view and his part flows through his art. Sometimes there's a clash between those two things, because the writer *explains* his point of view through the characters' mouths through his writing, and if the artist doubles up on that and expresses the same point of view with his art, it's overkill. One or the other has to give way. Either the art has to be alone to tell it sometimes, or the writing has to be alone to tell it. When the writer and artist are one person then you can *really* develop a relationship with the audience, because the audience gets to know the characters. People write in to us and say, "I *know* what Cutter was thinking in that silent panel just through the facial expression." That situation doesn't exist in

One of Wendy Pini's pencil pages, this one is from Elfquest: Siege At Blue Mountain #7.

GOLDEN DESERT CHILD, YOU SEEK A WAY IN, LIKE MICE YOU SQUEAK--
--BECAUSE YOU CANNOT FIND YOUR HOLE!
OH, NO...!
GRRRR...
AND THERE ARE FINDERS OF THE SCROLL!
HA HA HA HA HA!
WHAT?! THE WINNERS OF THE PALACE--
--LOST MOTHER HAS YOU TURNED AND TOSSED!
WITHOUT EXPRESSION, WITHOUT SO MUCH AS THE BLINK OF AN EYE, STRONGBOW DRAWS AND AIMS.

part flows through his art."

X-MEN or in TEEN TITANS.

RICHARD: Also, if you look at ELF-QUEST, it has a balance. Here is a harmonious mixture of adventure and family and love and hate and sex and death and so on and so on. That balance does not exist in the other titles. There is a hardness, if you will, a flintiness, a sharp edge of wit which is too sharp sometimes, a cynicism; and that's *absent* in ELF-QUEST. And I think people are *tired* of cynicism. I think readers are tired of cynicism.

WENDY: I think kids are getting more cynical and can identify with it, though.

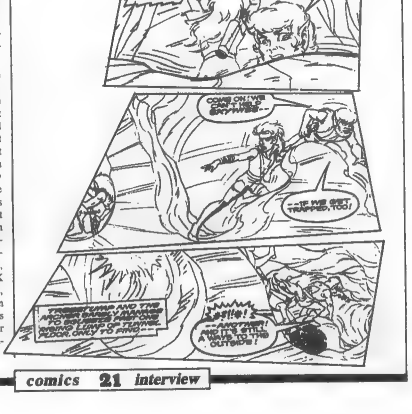
RICHARD: Well, that may be so, but on the one hand I can ask the question: Is it that the kids are getting more cynical and the comics are following them, or is it that the comics are cynical and the kids are just picking up on that and going along with it? The other question is: Is that really representative, or is that just representative of comics readers? I don't think it's representative of the world at large. I don't believe that it is. And that's another reason why I think people respond to ELF-QUEST differently than they do to X-MEN or TEEN TITANS. X-MEN, TEEN TITANS, WATCHMEN, DARK KNIGHT. They all contain this darkness, this grittiness, this "reality," this cynicism that reflects what is happening in this world. People are worried about nuclear war, people are worried about Apartheid —

WENDY: It reflects an attitude that one can take about what's happening in the world, because there's a lot of different things happening in the world.

RICHARD: Right, but these are the things which seem to clamor for the most attention.

WENDY: Right.

RICHARD: People, I think, in general are maybe a little fed up! They're fed up with a feeling of being worried, and they don't know what to do with it. If they escape into comics, or they look to comics for escapism, here are creatures that look exactly as they do, trying to cope with exactly the same kinds of problems that


SORRY, CUTTER, YOU!
STRONGBOW, LOOK!
COME ON! WE CAN'T LOSE ANYMORE...
—IF WE GET TRAPPED, YOU!
YOUR LIMB AND THE POWER BARON'S ARMORY TO BOOT! LIMB OF STONE, PERCH ONLY TO PINE—
AHAHA CUTTER! I KNEW THAT WOULD GET YOU OUT OF THERE!

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the readers are trying to cope with in their real lives.

WENDY: Creatures who look just like they do?

RICHARD: Yeah, humans, people. The X-Men and the Teen Titans —

WENDY: Yeah, that's true.

RICHARD: They may be mutants but they're still human stock. ELFQUEST is much more symbolic than that, it's much more indirect, and I like to say more subversive. People read ELFQUEST and see these *clearly* inhuman, although humanoid, creatures who are dealing with problems that may be the same problems that the readers have to deal with, but because they're not humans in an everyday human situation, the reader can gain whatever solace or truth or comfort that's to be had without feeling that he's had to face in his reading exactly what he's had to face in his real life. It's indirection.

WENDY: We got a really interesting negative letter the other day from a guy who said that he felt that WATCHMEN and DARK KNIGHT were essentially more honest than ELFQUEST because ELFQUEST "hippie-izes" — that was his phrase — the idea of violence and war as being necessary, and that the only way that man can rise and conquer his own feelings and weaknesses is to overcome the primitive within himself and become more godlike, more noble, more aesthetic or whatever. I was really surprised by that because to me the message in ELFQUEST is actually the opposite. The letter-writer gave the example of primitive human tribes being very friendly to other primitive human tribes, and therefore he was giving an example of primitive man actually being better than modern or civilized man, and we didn't *show* that in ELFQUEST. But he failed to mention the Amazon tribes in South America that are very loving and friendly within their own community but that would kill any stranger that comes near them. There are different *cazes* of being primitive. And how are we to judge whether they are more advanced than we are or not?

Our contention in ELFQUEST is not that war is necessary, or that violence is necessary, but that it *will* happen, it's kind of inevitable, and the only thing you can to is try to roll with the punches the best way you know how. Sometimes you can be swept up right in it and you don't even mean to be involved. I mean if somebody pushes a button somewhere in the next week or so, we're *all* going to be involved whether we want to be or not. So my feeling about violence is it's going to happen. You know, we've been mugged once; it just happens — and you roll with it and you try to come out of it whole; you try not to get bitter; you try to hope it'll never happen again; you try to do what you can so it will never happen again. That's what the message in ELFQUEST is, and I do think the majority of the readers did get that out of it; that you learn as you go along, roll with the punches, and that there is not an inevitable *doom* coming, you can have some sort of control over your own life. That's an encouraging sort of philosophy, I think.

PETER: *Yes, as opposed to most comic books, ELFQUEST's not about people whose jobs are to go out looking for trouble.*

WENDY: Right. They want to just stay in their little garden and just live there and hopefully trouble will never come to bother them, but if it does they try to roll with it.

PETER: *But it is about this primal search for identity.*

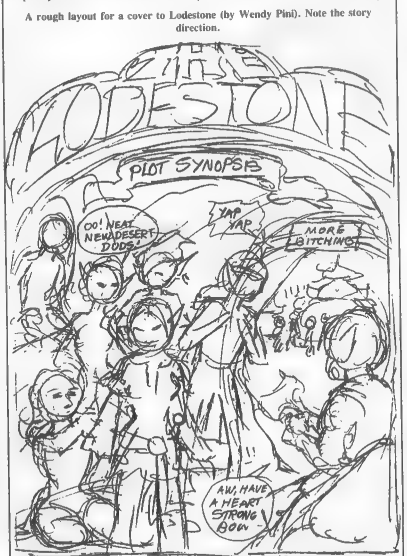
WENDY: Yeah.

RICHARD: Oh, yeah.

PETER: *I don't quite understand what you mean by indirection. It seems to me that a lot of the themes in ELFQUEST are very obviously related to the concerns of the readers.*

RICHARD: Related, yes, but those things in the comic are not happening to human beings, they're happening to symbols. Now these symbols are very appealing, some would say overly cute, but because they *are* symbols, and because they are constructed to be appealing, the readers can learn or feel *through* what the characters are doing. If I'm reading a coln-

A rough layout for a cover to Lodestone (by Wendy Pini). Note the story direction.



Elfquest: "I get more from their struggle

ic and I'm watching human beings struggling with Apartheid in South Africa, I'm getting a double dose of what I don't like, or what disturbs me, or however it affects me negatively. If I'm reading ELFQUEST and it's about these appealing little elfin creatures dealing with some sort of prejudice in a nonexistent land, and how they deal with it, I can *get* more from their struggle than I can from reading TEEN TITANS.

WENDY: I hope I won't offend any of the Christians that are reading this, but I think that Jesus is a perfect example of teaching through parable. I don't mean to compare ELFQUEST to any form of religion, although some fans have made it so, but in many ways there is the nature of a parable about what we're doing.

PETER: *Well, the stories can be read on different levels.*

WENDY: Yeah.

RICHARD: If you take ELFQUEST to its logical conclusion, you end up with something like AESOP'S FABLES. AESOP'S FABLES are parables distilled right down to their pure form; I mean they're a paragraph long and there's a little message in there, and they're *absolutely* symbolic. ELFQUEST is somewhere between AESOP'S FABLES and the front page of THE NEW YORK TIMES. And if you consider that ELFQUEST is in-between there, then what people are doing with today's comics, which are much more faithful reflections of today's world, is making them very close to the front page of THE NEW YORK TIMES, they've just changed the symbolism a little bit.

WENDY: SIEGE OF BLUE MOUNTAIN is an eight-issue mini-series about child abuse — very few people know this. There have been quite a few comics out recently that have dealt with really *important* social issues like drug abuse, child abuse, that sort of thing. SIEGE OF BLUE MOUNTAIN is eight issues' worth of a story about child abuse and its effects and its long-range effects on other people besides the child. Years from now if someone picks up SIEGE OF BLUE MOUNTAIN and reads it, they're going to get that subtle message in the middle of a fantasy story. Years from now if people pick up these relevant social issue books that have been published by the mainstream comics, they're going to go, "Oh, this is a relevant social issue comic about an issue that was very important back in the '80s." They're going to look at it that way. I think what we're doing is more timeless and in the future somebody can pick up SIEGE OF BLUE MOUNTAIN and read it and a light bulb will go on in his head — if they're still using light bulbs — and the message will

than I can from reading Teen Titans."

still have the same impact.

RICHARD: And unfortunately there's probably always going to be child abuse.

WENDY: Yeah.

RICHARD: But it's not always going to be in the public eye like it is this year.

WENDY: Yeah, it's become a trendy issue.

RICHARD: Marvel, DC, First, Eclipse, Comico all did child abuse issues. In ten years who knows what the social ill of the year will be. I don't mean to downplay it but it's the way this country thinks.

WENDY: And this is also not to downplay the *achievements* of those comics companies just mentioned.

RICHARD: No. But there's a trendiness in most comics that is unfortunate because, again, five or ten years from now a kid will be abused somewhere and maybe that kid or his parents or both will pick up ELFQUEST and recognize, even if not consciously, what's going on, whereas those child abuse issues that those other companies put out are going to be in mylar snugs as collectors' items.

PETER: *Do you feel that these other comics are too didactic in treating these subjects?*

WENDY: In some cases.

PETER: *Do you feel that ELFQUEST by being more symbolic in dealing with its themes encourages a stronger identification by the readers?*

WENDY: All I know is that when people get spoon-fed something, they tend to hang onto it less, while if they absorb it on their own and interpret it on their own, then it becomes part of them. If you open a kid's mouth and pour mush down his throat, he's going to get mush down his throat but he's not going to appreciate it.

Sometime later on when he's older and he's coming in from the cold on a winter's day and someone gives him some mush, he might just appreciate it more than he did when it got shoved down his throat because it's nice and warm and tasty. That's the only example I can think of.

There's a long article in the ELFQUEST GATHERUM Vol 2. about the women of ELFQUEST, it's an *amazing* article, and in the last paragraph the young woman who wrote it arrived at the conclusion that what ELFQUEST is all about for her is the importance of the individual, and how you are able to identify with each individual character in ELFQUEST on some level, and different people can *find* themselves in all the different characters. So that could account for the wide appeal.

PETER: *It's interesting that you publish analytical pieces on your own work. I don't think most people in this business encourage that kind of outside interpretation, much less different interpretations.*

RICHARD: Unless something is rabidly obnoxious and negative, there's something to be gotten from it.

WENDY: Yeah.

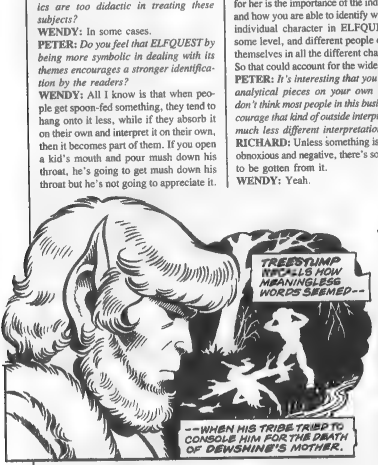
RICHARD: As the keeper of the letters pages I have almost from the beginning wanted to *encourage* an ongoing multilog, if you will. I grew up reading the mainstream comics and finding that most of the letters were kind of bland, and when we started doing ELFQUEST we started getting these *incredible* letters! Whether or not they were totally articulate, there was a sincerity of expression in them.

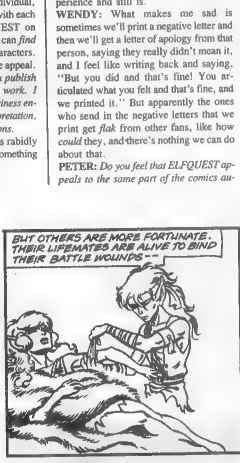
WENDY: We didn't know that that kind of readership was out there.

RICHARD: The letters were a joy to read. Even if one was written in block letters half-an-inch tall in crayon, there was generally a sincerity to what the person was trying to say. That was very refreshing to us. And occasionally the negative letter would come in, and 99% of those were constructive in some way or another; sometimes those letters would even cause us to open our eyes and say, "Well, yes, I guess you could interpret such-and-so in that way." So I felt it was only the honest thing to do to print them, and then people started responding to those letters, and it was really a joyous experience and still is.

WENDY: What makes me sad is sometimes we'll print a negative letter and then we'll get a letter of apology from that person, saying they really didn't mean it, and I feel like writing back and saying, "But you did and that's fine! You articulated what you felt and that's fine, and we printed it." But apparently the ones who send in the negative letters that we print get *flak* from other fans, like how *could* they, and there's nothing we can do about that.

PETER: *Do you feel that ELFQUEST appeals to the same part of the comics au-*





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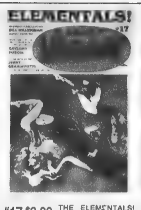

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"Why is The Cosby Show the #1 show."

dience that follows other books and that these other books just don't tap into this audience's feelings in quite the same way, or do you think that this is a separate audience? And has this ELFQUEST audience changed in any way since you got started, since the Marvel reprints got started, and since you got into the bookstores?

RICHARD: That's six different questions. To answer the first one: I think there is an overlap between the ELFQUEST audience and other comics audience, I *don't* think the two groups are identical. We get a lot of letters from people who say they don't read other comics, or they don't read comics but they read ELFQUEST, implying that ELFQUEST is somehow *not* what they perceive of comics as being. And just from the numbers we can see there's not the same audience. We have a much higher female-to-male reader ratio than any other comic in the business. We have almost 50% female readers. No other title can say that.

WENDY: I think X-MEN probably comes close.

RICHARD: Possibly, I don't know.

PETER: *X-MEN and TEEN TITANS in a way have the same sort of surrogate family of characters.*

RICHARD: That's why they're the most popular titles for their respective companies.

WENDY: But there's a huge untapped female audience out there.

RICHARD: There's also a huge untapped audience of people of all ages and both sexes who are looking for identification with group, with tribe, with family. We're living in a time of *terrible* isolation, personal isolation, personal alienation, and *anything* that evokes belonging to a group, whether it's ELFQUEST or X-MEN or TITANS or ELEMENTALS, is going to be accepted, is going to be read widely.

WENDY: You could say that's a good explanation as to why there's been such a rise in the power of fundamentalist evangelism: people are looking for something to follow. They're looking for something they can believe in, and it's never been as powerful in the media as it is right now. All those people, sheep going "baa," blindly following these very very fallible leaders, they're just looking for something to believe in.

RICHARD: Why is THE COSBY SHOW the #1 show?

PETER: *They're a surrogate family for the viewers.*

WENDY: And that's the only reason I can think of that STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION is popular at all, because it's very very flawed in my opinion, but people are still managing to find a sense of family. They're bringing so much of *themselves* to what they're seeing on the screen that I think that half of the popularity of the show is the creativity of the fans themselves at supplying what isn't there.

RICHARD: As to how *our* audience has changed from what it was originally.

WENDY: It's younger.

RICHARD: When we started we were

"A Time cover is not a bad thing to have."

getting a high school/college audience. That was where the majority of the readers were, although we had readers who were adults and readers who were young children.

WENDY: Well, we were almost an underground then, ELFQUEST was sold in head shops and —

RICHARD: No, I'm not talking about when we started, I'm talking about once we were rolling.

PETER: *Back then you were only in the direct sales shops, but with Marvel you got on the newsstands so that would account for some younger people.*

RICHARD: That's true. We had tremendous word of mouth advertising for the direct sales WaRP Graphics ELFQUEST, and that's where we got a lot of our non-comics readers who were of all ages. By the time the original ELFQUEST was winding up, around 1983, 1984, we had this wide spread of readers all over, not all of whom were comics readers. When Marvel began reprinting ELFQUEST as a newsstand comic, we saw a dramatic shift when we started getting the letters that came in through Marvel. It was like there was a five to ten year age drop. We started getting eight and ten and twelve-year-olds writing letters as opposed to 13 to 21-year-olds.

PETER: *Do you think that's because of the newsstand distribution?*

WENDY: I think it is. At signings suddenly we had to deal with all of these young boys going "When's Cutter going to get a new weapon?" and "Who's going to fight who?" and "Is there going to be more bloodshed?" They really were stereotypical. *(Laughter.)*

PETER: *And that's not the audience you were used to dealing with.*

WENDY: Yeah. All we could do was hope that the message was getting through some way. And we *did* meet some fascinating young people.

RICHARD: But now we're embarking on the third wave. ELFQUEST appeared from 1977 to 1984 as the WaRP Graphics comic, and then from 1985 to 1988 as the Marvel newsstand comic, and now in 1988 it's our tenth anniversary and we've got big plans all around. The biggest of those plans is to republish all of ELFQUEST, starting from the very first page of issue #1 back in 1977 all the way through all of the Marvel editions and including SIEGE OF BLUE MOUNTAIN, in brand new anniversary edition color book volumes. There will be a total of six of them. And what I am hoping and pushing very hard to accomplish is to get those books *completely* out of that little, very well circumscribed comics audience and out into the vastness of America.

PETER: *When I see the Donning ELFQUEST books in the bookstores, they are usually in the s-f section.*

RICHARD: This is true, but no doubt the Father Tree Press editions will appear in s-f, too. However, we do have now ten times the distribution potential into trade book stores than the Donning books ever had, because we have distribution through Berkley same as First Comics and Fantagraphics and a couple of others. What I want to try to effect is that these books also go into maybe the young adult section.

WENDY: Yeah.

RICHARD: So all of the hoopla of a ROLLING STONE article or something of that nature —

PETER: *Or TIME.*

RICHARD: A TIME cover is not a bad thing to have.

WENDY: Oh, no.

RICHARD: I would rather have an article in WORKING MOTHER or FAMILY CIRCLE or PARENTS MAGAZINE, because ELFQUEST being *such* a symbolic family story — there are a lot of families in this country —

WENDY: Now, how do you ask a family magazine to do an article about a series that among other things has rather graphic violence and a little orgy scene? *(Laughter.)*

RICHARD: This is Wendy playing **Oprah Winfrey.** *(Laughter.)*

WENDY: But anyway, we've been around the mulberry bush on this because, frankly, I have my reservations about the liberal perspective. In the '80s the structure of the family has changed, and it's a topic of great discussion right now. There's absolutely no question that kids are more sophisticated now in *certain* ways. There's also no question that they're less educated now than they've ever been, which is a strange contradiction, that

OOF!
UNH!
TH-THE WHOLE PLACE IS MOVING— AND IT'S LIKE HOT MUD! I'M WORN'S BLOOD!
BUFFETED AND BRUISED, THE TWO TRIBEMATES STAGGER BACK TO THE CHAMBER OF THE EGG—
—WHERE THEY FIND A SMALL ISLAND OF STABILITY SURROUNDED BY WIDELY UNDULATING STONE!
WHATEVER WINNOWWIZE IS DOING, RAYEK'S HELPING HER!
NOT ALL BY CHOICE, CUTTER'S SAW HER WORK ON HIM!

"On the other hand ELFQUEST does deal with sex."

--AND SUDDENLY, THE UNWEPT TEARS OF A BRIGHT SWINGLY LORD AND LORD LIFETIME DUSH FORTH.
THERE, THERE...MY BOY-CHILD... MY SWEET LITTLE SON... THERE...!
S-SON...?

they're more sophisticated and yet less literate. But I do think that there is a kind of a fear in the air that keeps people from wanting to take risks in the kind of material that the family shares. And I worry about that for ELFQUEST because we feel that we have handled every topic that we've presented in ELFQUEST very carefully; we've tried to present it very carefully, we've tried to present it in such a way that people *think* about it, talk about it, have different points of view about it; because it's very important that people think, and it's very important that families get together and talk about things. On the other hand ELFQUEST does deal with sex and with violence as a part of a whole circle, as a part of all of these experiences. And I have my reservations about people's willingness, particularly with the scare about AIDS and sex education in schools and everything, I have my doubts about people's willingness to even bring the slight odor of controversy into their households.

RICHARD: And this is where we enter into our debate. *(Laughter.)* My feeling about the tenor of the country is that families are confused. There are forces at work on the American family that have been at work for the last 20 years, and now we are beginning to see the result, feel the effects of those forces. I think that parents, a lot of them, would probably like to go back to some pre-1967 time when things *felt* safer even if they really weren't.

PETER: *But I daresay that there's nothing in ELFQUEST that even the youngest readers don't already know about.*

RICHARD: This is it, you see —

PETER: *But parents don't want to see that. I remember when I was in grade school that parents would have been shocked had they known that we knew about sex and talked about sex and so on, because we weren't supposed to know that.*

RICHARD: This is why I think ELFQUEST can work. Parents would like to go back to those times when kids *didn't* know that stuff, or when they *thought* that kids didn't know that stuff. Now there's no escaping the knowledge that the kids know that stuff.

WENDY: If they watch MTV they know it.

RICHARD: And the kids are bringing it home, and they are confused! They *hear* it, they *experiment* with it, but they don't know what it is and they don't know how to deal *emotionally* with it. So ELFQUEST is again this indirect, undreatening or less threatening look at some of these things which are contemporary problems.

WENDY: It's not a solution, it's not a point of view or advocacy of a life style, particularly in the area of sex; we've taken into consideration the biological and psychological difference between our characters and human beings, and when you're immortal you have a different attitude towards sex than if you're a mortal. And they also have by our standards an immoral and casual way of interacting with each other sexually, but we don't feel that we are advocating this. What we're doing is presenting it so it can be talked about.

PETER: *So you think ELFQUEST should be advertised for these new audiences as sort of the equivalent of a PG movie where families aren't just encouraged to give it to the kids but to read it along with them?*

RICHARD: That's what people have been saying about television for years, why won't people just talk about it. You

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"Nine years old and she had read the orgy scene."

don't have to accept what's there, but if you talk about it you *defuse* it. If something is threatening or strange or unknown or scary, you talk about it and you look at it in context. The thing about our characters is that for the most part they all care very deeply, whether for each other or for life in general or for the environment or for children, and whatever they do in the context of those *feelings* is certainly worth talking about around the dinner table.

WENDY: I have a letter tacked up to my bulletin board over my drawing table that came in from a nine-year-old girl that said, "What the heck is a dance? Otherwise I like your comic." *(Laughter.)* This kid was nine years old and she had read the orgy scene and apparently didn't understand all that was there, but she didn't seem disturbed by it.

RICHARD: We were also approached by an eleven-year-old boy who had read that scene and he said, "Thank you for not talking down to me."

WENDY: M-hm.

RICHARD: Here's a kid and by whatever means he felt he *knew* this, but he was neither threatened nor embarrassed, he felt respected.

WENDY: Now on the flip side of that, there are people who have torn up ELFQUEST and have said they'll never read anything we do ever again on account of that.

RICHARD: So we're going to get all responses. I think that the American situation is such that more people will look at ELFQUEST and find bits and pieces of themselves in the symbolism, and be *attracted* to it for that reason, than will see the superficiality of some bare skin here or some behavior there that doesn't fit their own moral code, and be repelled by it.

WENDY: You know, our European audience, to the best of my knowledge, never had any problem with those scenes at all. Those scenes are accepted as absolutely *natural* to the graphic novel format, the nudity, the eroticism. The things that upset our European readers is when a character acts out of character, or acts in a way that breaks up the family in some way. They're very concerned with family.

PETER: *Well, of course, it could be asked why the nudity should be objected to?*

WENDY: Of course, but you *know* America still has this repulsion towards it.

RICHARD: It doesn't matter.

WENDY: What?

RICHARD: It doesn't matter what the people's moral code is.

WENDY: But the point I was trying to make is that in Europe they've already gotten over all this. Okay, now you can talk.

RICHARD: Why *thank* you! *(Laughter.)* What I was saying is it doesn't matter what the moral code is, but I think that to compose that code willy-nilly is wrong. Whether, for example, in a particular household it's okay for the children to see their parents in the nude is something of concern to that family, but how they arrive at their decision about it is the important thing. And I think that it should be done by discussion.

WENDY: Sex right now is probably the touchiest topic there is because of the terror of the AIDS epidemic, and —

PETER: *I suspect that the kind of reaction we're talking about where people*

"Alikazam The Great . . . probably the worst

would object to certain subjects being in a comic book, they might just use that as an excuse for refusing to deal with the subjects at all.

WENDY: Yeah. But we feel that living in fear is the absolute dumbest thing you can do. If you're terrified of something the best thing you can do is to go *towards* it and *look* at it rather than pull away.

RICHARD: And nothing should have that kind of power to make you pull away.

PETER: *It also occurs to me that maybe another thing that makes ELFQUEST unique is that here the two of you are discussing treating sophisticated themes, and not writing down to the youngest readers, but at the same time being very aware that your audience spans a very wide range of age. Whereas it seems in many comics that dealing with a young audience and with mature themes are regarded as mutually exclusive, and if you're going to do sophisticated themes, then you're only writing for an older audience. There's more and more of an attempt to ghettoize the younger kids, leaving the very simple and childish material to the children as if there's nothing else possible for them.*

RICHARD: Everybody is missing a bet, but we're not what everybody else is! *(Laughter.)* There is a form of literature that has been read or used or consumed, if you will, by all ages for hundreds if not thousands of years —

WENDY: Pornography? *(Laughter.)*

RICHARD: Fairy tales, fables, and what we have uncharitably today called "children's stories." LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD, HANSEL AND GRETEL. Kids have read these for centuries, decades, whatever, and adults read them; there are *layers* of symbolism, you read into it what you bring to it. ELFQUEST's in that boat, it's a fairy tale, a fable, and depending upon what you bring to it, that's how you read it.

WENDY: Let me show you how sharp kids are — and this is back in the '60s so God knows how sharp they are now — when I was ten years old I got started getting my interest in Japanese comics and animation by seeing a film called ALIKAZAM THE GREAT by **Osamu Tezuka** — it is probably the *worst* American translation of a Japanese cartoon ever made — *(Laughter.)* However, this film — and I was a fairly average ten-year-old I think — this film was my introduction to the Buddhist philosophy. Despite that fact that they changed all of the names of the gods and they messed up the story and put it out of order and everything, I learned that this was the story of **Sung Wu Kung** the Monkey King,

who was one of **Buddha's** acolytes, and I learned about Buddhism and so forth — just by seeing this silly little film. It absolutely opened my mind. And that was at the age of ten. I really believe that no matter how *poor* the translation of a fairy tale is, or a fable, that something's going to click in the mind. I mean you've seen all kinds of adaptations of SLEEPING BEAUTY and CINDERELLA, from the **Disney** version to the **Perrault** version, and they get progressively more awful as Hallmark gets ahold of them, but still the basic meaning comes through. It *always* gets through.

PETER: *And actually even superheroes are in a way symbols, it's just that most of them you can only take on one level.*

RICHARD: Exactly!

PETER: *On the most literal level.*

RICHARD: The most literal, the most immediate.

PETER: *And with DARK KNIGHT and WATCHMEN, we see examples that are capable of more than one level, and that may be part of the reason for their success.*

WENDY: M-hm.

RICHARD: *But* I would be willing to bet — Ten years from now DARK KNIGHT and WATCHMEN — will not have the appeal, the recognition, whatever, that I think ELFQUEST will have.

WENDY: I wouldn't go that far — God knows what will happen. All that I know is that ELFQUEST has demonstrated a lot of staying power, and it's going to hang onto an audience of a wide age range.

PETER: *That's something else I was going to ask you about, that ELFQUEST is something that has lasted. But also we've seen comics that were hot in one decade but not in another, and seen styles change in both writing and art. I was wondering do you in fact do ELFQUEST as a book intended to last, and how do you try to give ELFQUEST that ability to last so you won't have to have the POST-CRISIS ELFQUEST?* (Laughter.)

RICHARD: *Blech*, scary thought. Two answers, one going back to what we were talking before; the story of ELFQUEST is, I think, timeless. There will always be

American translation of a Japanese cartoon."

families, there will always be problems within those families, there will always be people who feel alienated from the group, there will always be people who are searching for an identity.

PETER: *And perhaps the fact that they are elves and not simply drawn as human beings with pointed ears also helps.*

RICHARD: Exactly.

PETER: *It's like classic animated cartoons, when I was growing up it didn't occur to me that they had been made 30 years before.*

WENDY: M-hm.

RICHARD: There's that sense of timelessness about them. So that's one way in which we feel ELFQUEST is designed to keep on appealing. The other is that even starting back when we were first doing the WaRP Graphics black-and-white comics, we did something no other comic ever did, and I think only maybe a few of them do now: we kept them in print. We did not let them go out of print and thus hard to find and thus appealing only to a certain small group of collectors; ELFQUEST was always available to anybody who wanted it, at the cover price.

PETER: *That could be especially important for a story that took years to complete.*

RICHARD: Exactly.

PETER: *Because otherwise you would have new readers being lost.*

RICHARD: And since it didn't just appeal to this small group of collectors, it was able to go *outside* of comics, it was able to begin to penetrate into an audience that really didn't care about comics. You're only aware of trends within the comics if you're a fan of comics. Someone who doesn't read comics doesn't know about these things, doesn't care about those things; they only see they like it or they don't like it. If they pick up ELFQUEST and like it, I think they're going to *sense* its timelessness and its appeal to them, its relation to them.

PETER: *Things can also be dated in terms of attitudes reflected in the work, in which case I think ELFQUEST has also been lucky.*

RICHARD: There are levels of examining problems: let's say 1988 Apartheid is your top level, and if you go below that, you're really talking about a type of prejudice, and if you go *deeper* than that, you're talking about prejudice in its primal sense. Most comics demonstrate the more immediate, more superficial examination of problems. ELFQUEST gets down to very basic, very universal truths that are being talked about within the symbolism of the elfin characters and the unnamed world and the unspecified time. And 1988 Apartheid may not be meaningful in 1993, but prejudice, primal prejudice, probably will be.

WENDY: Same as violence. There's going to be all different forms of it, all different shades of it. It's been part of us since before we crawled out of the swamp. We have to acknowledge that it's been a part of us, and there's none of this malarkey about rising above it, it's just *dealing* with it.

PETER: *Well, you've been at this ten years now, have your attitudes towards the work changed significant to your life experiences as you pass from your 20s into your 30s? Do you see different things in the work now than you did when you started, and in the new stories are you trying to bring out different aspects then when you started?*

WENDY: The whole thing has been a learn as you go thing. When we started we didn't know a thing about publishing and I had never done a comic book before. We are still learning as we go. However, we have arrived at a certain plateau . . . well, let me personalize this: I have arrived at a certain plateau as an artist. This year I'm going to be doing a book called HOW TO DRAW THE BLANKETY-BLANK ELVES. *(Laughter.)* Believe it or not there is a formula for drawing them, for getting the proportions right and for them to be consistent at any angle. I'm going to publish this book and I hope that perhaps out of the 5,000 or so people that read it maybe two of them will send us some artwork that we can use, because I don't wish to continue to be the sole source of ELFQUEST art. There are many more stories to tell than I can draw. So this is kind of a how to draw ELFQUEST book.

I don't believe that even as recently as just several years ago I would have been able to do this book. For some reason something just fairly recently clicked open and now I *know* the way to do these characters, I know the formula. I'm no

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"They're not normal, they're caricatures."

longer working so much from inspiration, I'm working more from skill, and this is something that I can pass on now. You know, for ten years fans have been writing and saying, "I wish I could draw the elves the same way you draw them." I could *see* the frustration that they felt, "I can't get these eyes not to cross; I don't understand these proportions, they're not normal." Of course they're not normal, they're caricatures. But now I can show them how, because I've arrived at a point in ELFQUEST where . . . I guess it involves a little bit of detachment where I can step back and say this is the formula for drawing them, do this, this, and this. **RICHARD:** Which is not to say that the stories are formularized, or that the *feeling* toward the stories is formularized. We'll probably be telling stories for a long, long time; they're there. The considerations which those stories reflect are there, and they want looking at through the symbolism of ELFQUEST.

WAITER: *(bringing charge slip)* Here you go, sir. I hope you enjoyed everything.

WENDY: Yes, we did, thank you.

RICHARD: You see, even here they want my signature. *(Laughter.)*

WENDY: Are we going to be able to get your head in the car? *(Laughter.)*

RICHARD: As Wendy said, there's too much for one artist to do. **Gene Roddenberry** created STAR TREK and no matter how you view the ups and downs of that show or its successors, he couldn't have done it all himself and we wouldn't have had it if he'd tried to do it all himself. He had other people working, he had a support group there; whatever you want to call it, he had others involved. We think ELFQUEST will support the same kind of approach. It's got to. Neither one of us can *give* ELFQUEST the concept all that it deserves, and survive, because it's too much —

WENDY: It's gotten bigger than two people can deal with. You know, between BLOOD OF TEN CHIEFS, all of the fan activity and the GATHERUMs and the color book series, and we're still making very strong efforts towards getting it animated, we're trying every avenue — it's much more than two people can do. And I'm going to be very hard on the fans in this book about how to draw the elves, I'm going to say, "Alright, you guys, you've had your fun for ten years, now it's time you got off your duffs and learn how to draw these characters, and if you want to be a part of it, *be* a part of it." Maybe something will come out of it.

RICHARD: I suppose there's a certain amount of feeling that we really ought not to feel, but we have to justify why we're doing things this way because there are people out there who will say, "If you don't do it yourself, every line, every situation, then it's not pure, it's not yours, you're selling out, yaddabladdablah." I think that's *valid.* If somebody wants to do that for 25 years that's fine, but —

WENDY: I don't know how **Hal Foster** did it.

RICHARD: It's not the *only* way to do things, it's not the only *valid* way to do things, it's not the only *pure* way to do things.

WENDY: If people want to see other stories from me, and other characters, they gotta help me out. In ten years no one's come to us who can really handle the characters. Pros have tried it, a lot of fans have tried it, and they haven't nailed down the specifics to the point where —

RICHARD: If a vision is strong it will survive, and ELFQUEST is a very strong vision.

PETER: *So what the two of you are saying is that you plan that there be more new ELFQUEST comics, and they'll be written by you but not necessarily drawn by you, and probably the two of you will be moving on to other characters and creations as well?*

WENDY: Absolutely.

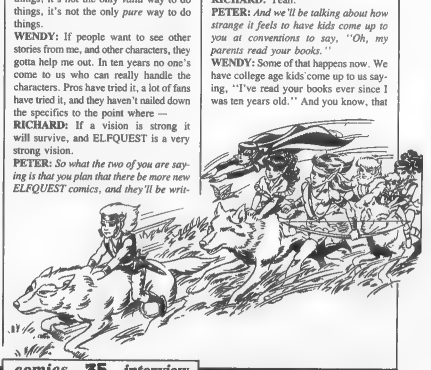
RICHARD: That's certainly a very strong possibility. But we will never give up ELFQUEST. ELFQUEST will never be taken over by others.

PETER: *And perhaps when you do the interview ten years from now you'll still have ELFQUEST projects going on?*

RICHARD: Yeah.

PETER: *And we'll be talking about how strange it feels to have kids come up to you at conventions to say, "Oh, my parents read your books."*

WENDY: Some of that happens now. We have college age kids come up to us saying, "I've read your books ever since I was ten years old." And you know, that



"Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

has an effect. How many times have I been 30 now? *(Laughter.)*

RICHARD: There are young parents coming up who say, "I started reading your books when I was in high school and I've got a two-year-old daughter now, and I'm just waiting to read it to her next year or the year after."

PETER: *Being a teacher has had much the same effect for me, the kids start talking about the '60s as being ancient history.*

RICHARD: Well, I remember when I taught high school, realizing that some of the kids I was teaching and to whom I was waxing poetic about the Apollo 11 moon landing, hadn't been born then! *(Laughter.)* I took a couple of steps back at that point and went, "Oh, my God!"

PETER: *Well, there are fellow professionals that I see all of the time now who were like one year old when that happened.*

WENDY: Well, I am going to leave the table shortly, so I will sum up my feelings about all this: After ten years I don't think ELFQUEST has that much to do with comics, if it ever did.

PETER: *The ELFQUEST comics or comics in general?*

WENDY: I don't think it has that much to do with comics in general. I remember one of the first interviews I did was a radio interview and the last question asked was, "What do you see as the future of comics?" This was like one or two years into our publishing of ELFQUEST, and I said, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn." I don't really see myself as being really closely involved with comics or being with them as a reader all my life. And I would have to say that after ten years whatever ELFQUEST is, it doesn't have very much to do with what everybody else seems to be doing. In that sense it's sort of almost alien, like in its own milieu.

PETER: *But you still see it as part of your career for the foreseeable future.*

WENDY: I see it as something that's going to live in spite of me. I didn't expect this. I see it as something that's going to go on no matter *what* happens.

PETER: *And in various media.*

WENDY: And in various media. I mean we've got some big famous science-fiction writers involved with the stories in THE BLOOD OF TEN CHIEFS; we've got fans writing their own stories. *(Wendy departs.)*

RICHARD: The comics industry has never quite known *what* to make of ELFQUEST. From the very beginning ELFQUEST did everything wrong. It was in black-and-white, it was the wrong size, it was the wrong price, the issues stayed in print, it was *fantasy* —

PETER: *It was a continued story that spanned years.*

RICHARD: It was done by a *woman* artist. Every rule, every convention, was broken, and for ten years the fan press, the comics press, hasn't really known what to make of ELFQUEST, and so by and large has ignored it. That *hurt* for a long while when we were first doing ELFQUEST. It doesn't hurt anymore because we realize that maybe ELFQUEST doesn't really have that much connection to the comics as we know comics. It's a different bird, and ultimately it's going to find its widest acceptance with a different audience.

The comics audience, I think, will be a part of that, but not the major part of it. And maybe there's a sense that the comics industry and the comics fans *know* this about ELFQUEST, and maybe to a tiny little extent that alienates them or makes them feel uncomfortable. But it no longer makes *us* feel uncomfortable because we're trying very hard to go where no comic and where no ELFQUEST has gone before. I suppose if ten or twenty or thirty years from now ELFQUEST is looked upon as the new classic fable or fairy tale, then that will mean that we have succeeded in what we wanted to do.

PETER: *What other things are you planning for this tenth anniversary besides the Father Tree Press editions?*

RICHARD: Well, Father Tree Press, as I like to say, is a branch of WaRP Graphics, and it is the one that publishes the books and it did CHROMA and it did

"I miss the simplicity in the market."

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SAVAH!
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LAW AND CHAOS and it did volume #1 of THE GATHERUM and volume #2 of THE GATHERUM, which is part of the celebration. The six color graphic novel volumes are the biggest part of the 1988 celebration. The how to draw the elves book will come at the end of the year, that's part of it. We've made up tenth anniversary buttons and we're trying to blanket the country with them. We have a tenth anniversary poster that's going to be in the shops and trade stores everywhere, it'll go into COMICS BUYER'S GUIDE and everywhere. And we are starting to put together a schedule of conventions and store signings. That's not firmed up yet because most of this activity takes place during the second half of 1988, but that pretty much *covers* the plans for the year, it's going to keep us pretty busy.

WENDY: *(Returns.)* What'd I miss?

PETER: *We're talking about all of the plans for the tenth anniversary celebration.*

WENDY: Oh.

PETER: *When do we see ELFQUEST: THE OPERA?*

RICHARD: As soon as we can get **Andrew Lloyd Webber** to answer the calls. *(Laughter.)*

WENDY: Have you seen our new LAW AND CHAOS book?

PETER: *No, I don't think I have.*

WENDY: Oh, you might be interested in that, it's very Wagnerian. *(Laughter.)*

PETER: *Is there anything you'd like to add to bring this to a close?*

RICHARD: I think the most important point is that if we have *anything* to say about it, ELFQUEST is going to do what comics are trying to do generally. They keep talking about *breaking out* to new audiences, new markets, and they're not providing anything new to do it with, anything with appeal to people other than those who like superheroes. No matter how sophisticated and timely and worldly those superheroes get, it's still the same thing, it's still that same superficial examination. If we have anything to say about it, ELFQUEST is going to, break out and become something that people who don't necessarily read comics are going to pick up and read as something to read to their kids.

PETER: *Is there anything you miss about the days when it was just the two of you trying to get the book out?*

WENDY: Not me, I'm happier now than I ever was back then because there was a great degree of uncertainty — not that there isn't some uncertainty now, but back then we didn't know what the future of the series was going to be or whether we were even going to do anything more than just break even on it. The very exciting thing about the beginning was when we started getting some feedback, when the letters started coming in, and we were absolutely amazed.

RICHARD: I miss the simplicity in the market. There were a lot fewer titles, and when I dealt with the distributors, for example, it was real simple: they gave me the orders, I sold them. They didn't have to pick and choose and worry about every penny going just where it should be because there's 800 titles this month, and 36 pricey books.

PETER: *Maybe that's what I'm trying to get at, whether at a certain point, it becomes too much of a business for your taste, whether that takes away from the fun of actually doing the creating?*

RICHARD: It happened a couple of years ago when WaRP Graphics tried to be a comic-book company; that was not the right thing for WaRP Graphics to be, I admit that. Right now WaRP Graphics is two people again, we're doing exactly the amount of work that we can handle, and it's fun! It's very nerve-racking sometimes, there's a lot of pressure sometimes, but at the same time it's *ours* again, and that's a very good and exciting feeling.

"Mussolini prohibited American comics except MICKEY

MARCO LUPOI

After the death of the Marvel superheroes — caused by the bankruptcy of the large Como publishing concern nearly five years ago — SPIDER-MAN has only recently been revived in Italian editions. The translator, Marco Lupoi, began his comics career by publishing a fanzine in collaboration with others, which has since gone on to national newsstands and professional publication in Italy. His knowledge of and enthusiasm for American comics enables him not only to write about the U.S. comics scene and to translate SPIDER-MAN — but also puts him in a perfect position to order imported titles for the retail comics store owned by his publishers, Alessandro Distribuzioni, which he has been doing now for many months.

Just over an hour from Venice by car, Bologne is a university town — and site of the local Italian version of the Frankfurt Book Fair. We visited Marco there, at the Alessandro's store, for an amazing interview on the state of comics in Italy ...

VITAL STATISTICS

Name: Marco Lupoi
Born: 1 May 1965 — Rome
Occupation: I work for an Italian publisher who publishes a lot of comics; I translate Marvel comics for Star Comics, which is a small publisher
Worst Thing About Italy: There are no DC comics — but everybody wants them
Favorite Comics From Different Countries: I like very much all the work by Magnus; I like Vittorio Giardino, HUNGARIAN RHAPSODY and ORIENT GATEWAY; I like Manara, INDIAN SUMMER is a masterwork according to me; and I like Sidney Jordan, JEFF HAWKE; KEN PARKER; I like John Buscema on THE AVENGERS; Byrne's FANTASTIC FOUR; Miller's DAREDEVIL; I like WONDER WOMAN; some SUPERMAN; WATCHMEN; LOVE AND ROCKETS, Brothers Hernandez are very good; GRENDEL; I like MAI; CONCRETE is brilliant

DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT: *Could you briefly explain for our readers what you do?*

MARCO LUPOI: I am one of the editors of FUMO DI CHINA, I am the editor of the American section of FUMO DI CHINA. This is our tenth year of publishing and I have been working for them for six years.

DAK: *What does FUMO DI CHINA mean?*

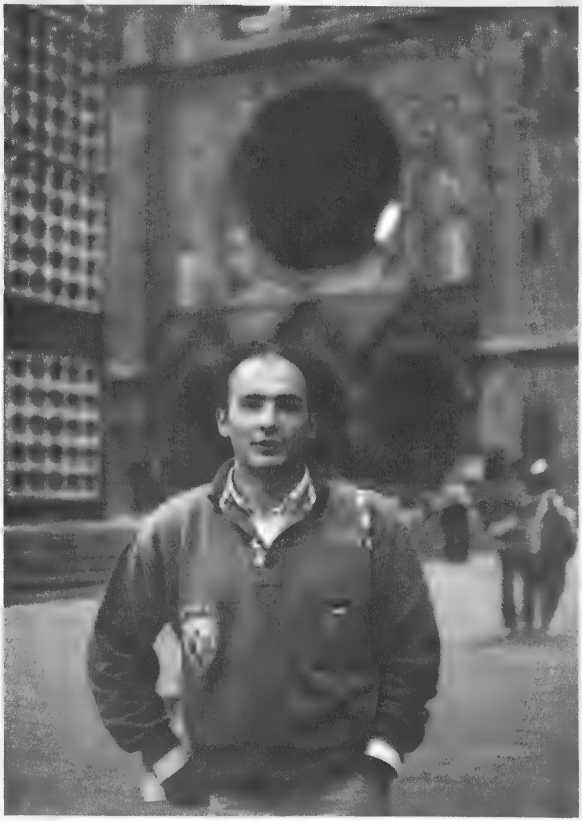
MARCO: It's a pun, like "Smoke of China," but also "Smoke of Ink" because china (*pronounced kina)* is ink in Italian — and China is written Cina — so it's "Smoke of Ink" literally.

DAK: *And it's been published for ten years?*

MARCO: At first it was very very small, like a homemade magazine with 500 copies only. Regional. Then it started growing and growing and growing, and now we're a national magazine, the bestselling national magazine about comics in Italy. We've won awards and stuff and we are quite well known.

The owners of this shop, they are the editors of FUMO DI CHINA — they are also the publishers of a series of graphic novels — Alessandro Distribuzioni. They are the biggest distributor in Italy; they cater to bookstores, they import American comics, British comics, French comics. Up until a year ago we published FUMO DI CHINA in our home. Now they

MOUSE, because his son was one of the biggest fans."



"I am a big client. I don't know how many

publish FUMO DI CHINA and the first issue was given away for free to 6,000 people as promotion.

DAK: *Did you sell out to them?*

MARCO: No, we simply needed someone to support us financially, because we wanted to have more pages and we wanted to have color covers. So they said they would publish it and we would work for them, and since we are putting a fanzine out and that was the chance to become a prozine — and we were friends with them — so we did it

DAK: *Did it increase the circulation?*

MARCO: It surely did, because we went to national distribution. We are sold also in newsstands all over the region of Bologne, and it sells very well in the newsstands. The first one had a **Sienkiewicz** BATMAN cover, the second one a **Magnus** cover, and the third one a **Jean Graton** cover — he is a French author with a car racing strip called MICHEL VAILLANT that is quite popular in France and in Italy, too. MICHEL VAILLANT books are published in Italy by Alessandro Distribuzioni as albums, along with other French albums like THE SURVIVORS and LUCKY LUKE. Also they are reprinting this series by **Magnus** called LA COMPANGNIA DELLA FORCA in *huge* volumes, it's like this medieval humor/fantasy series.

JULIA MATHER: *What does that mean?*

MARCO: It's... what is the thing you hang people with?

DAK: *The noose?*

JULIA: *The hook?*

MARCO: No no, like the whole thing, the whole structure?

DAK: *Gallows.*

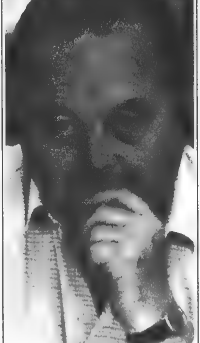
MARCO: Yeah, it's THE COMPANY OF THE GALLOWS. It's humor and it's fantasy and it's medieval war, in the *real* middle ages. In the 1970s it came out in the digest format and now everybody wants it in the big format, very big.

DAK: *And, here in the shop, what do you do?*

MARCO: I do orders for the American comics. At first, when Alessandro's started, it was a very very small shop that only sold used comics — over here we don't care anything about the grade of the comic book, that's very strange.

DAK: *That's great. I think that's wonderful because comics are meant to be read.*

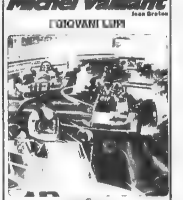
MARCO: Yeah. I have a collection of American comics — I think I have 90% of the American comics that have come out from 1980 'till now — but I think it's probably worthless from an American point of view because I have read them time and time again, but I don't care. I



Jean Graton

have all of the Italian Marvels in terrible shape because I bought most of them used, but I don't care.

So we sell and buy used comics, and then they started importing French material, French albums, French magazines, and they started growing and growing and growing, and then I — I was just a client — and they wanted to buy American comics. They had started to buy a few Marvels, and I came over and



because they never had enough I said, "Why don't you start buying DCs, why don't you increase Marvels." So we started off, and now we have over 500 customers who have a standing order with us. That's a *lot*, if you think about it, because English is not our language and they are rather expensive — they cost about twice as much as in the United States. We have many people from all over Italy who buy from us on a mail order.

DAK: *A subscription service?*

MARCO: We have a subscription service like Mile High has. And I do the ordering for them, and I have been doing that for four years.

DAK: *You told us earlier that you never buy American comics if you haven't seen them, so how do you ever order anything that you haven't seen?*

MARCO: I read all of the fanzines, and I am very very influenced by reviews. I read all of the reviews, so if I read a good review I might start buying a series. Most Marvels you have to buy even if you don't like them, because there are clients who know they are coming out and they ask for them, and the same thing for DC. For example most DCs –1 and most Marvels –1 you *have* to order because you know that someone will ask for them; you can't read X-MEN without being aware that they are putting out EXCALIBUR and so you have to order EXCALIBUR in huge quantities because you *assume* that every client who buys X-MEN will buy EXCALIBUR.

With independents it's a very strange thing, because of course they are not our biggest interest, because most have never been published in Italy — never — so people don't know them, and they are more expensive. But there are some — for example the Eclipse Japanese comics are very popular, and NEXUS, and the new AMERICAN FLAGG. Some people look at art and, if they know an author, they get it. For example **Paul Gulacy's** stuff, he's rather popular because his SHANG-CHI was published in black-and-white in the 1970s, and so all of the stuff he has done for other publishers has sold quite well. Artists like **Gil Kane, Gene Colan, Paul Gulacy** are rather popular here because people started loving them with the Marvels and they are following them. There is also the **Byrne** following and the **Miller** following and they buy *everything* that is put out.

DAK: *Well, with the material that comes in from the independent publishers from the States, what type of material, is there a following for? What do you bring in?*

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Americans buy over $400 every month."

MARCO: We don't bring all of the independents. For example from Renegade we buy KAFKA — only for pure nationalism, because it was made by an Italian — and we buy SILENT INVASION because it is very French looking, and MS. TREE because detectives are very popular here. From Comico we have ELEMENTALS and ... what else do they have ... GRENDEL! GRENDEL is my favorite comic! It's very popular, maybe because I *promose* it so much — whenever I talk to someone I say that's my favorite comic!

DAK: *So from Comico that's it, you don't have JUSTICE MACHINE —*

MARCO: No, we have JUSTICE MACHINE.

DAK: *How about the ROBOTECH books?*

MARCO: Yeah, we have all of the ROBOTECH stuff because we have the cartoons so kids are buying them. We don't have JONNY QUEST. I like JONNY QUEST a lot because I remember the cartoon show, but no one seems to remember it except me, no one's buying it. I get them for myself but I need a discount, I don't buy from Alessandro's, I buy from Mile High, because I buy more than $400 every month. I need my discount.

DAK: *Wow, a heavy user.*

MARCO: I am a big client. I don't know how many Americans buy over $400 every month.

DAK: *Capital, the distribution company, has a graph that shows each month what it would cost to buy one copy of every comic. It has been $900 in peak months if you were to buy everything.*

MARCO: How much?

DAK: *Anywhere from $600 to $900.*

MARCO: To buy everything. But I don't know, except for **T.M. Maple**, no one does. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *If T.M. Maple ever stops buying comic books the whole industry is going to crash.* (Laughter.)

MARCO: Yeah, probably. I wonder who he is? I ought to write to him if I have the time. You have interviewed him.

DAK: *Yeah, we did back in issue #24, but he remained a mystery. It was all done by telephone.*

MARCO: He's an American tradition now — a Canadian tradition.

DAK: *So, do you bring all of the First comics in?*

MARCO: No, we don't bring DYNAMO JOE, we don't bring WHISPER. We bring in AMERICAN FLAGG and SABLE and the **Moorcock** books, which are quite popular with our fans because they like fantasy and science fiction. LONE WOLF we import, it sells quite well; I think we don't have one single issue here because all of the issues sell immediately.

DAK: *How about BADGER?*

MARCO: No.

DAK: *I recommend it to you, that's my favorite First title.*

MARCO: I quit reading that because ... I think you have to be really American to enjoy it.

DAK: *That may well be.*

MARCO: Yeah, it's very hard to relate to him if you don't *share* the way he lives.

DAK: *What I like about it is each issue is different, it's not the same adventure. You don't quite know what to expect, that's what I like about it.*

MARCO: Yeah. I read it for a couple of years and then I stopped for this reason. We have some continuity but it's very *rare* because they don't want to *shock* readers. But for example Ken Parker got married, had children, lost his memory, now for two years he has been chased by the Pinkerton Agency because he has killed police, and he has met — I don't know — the woman who was **Marilyn Monroe** in the last century — not a ghost or —

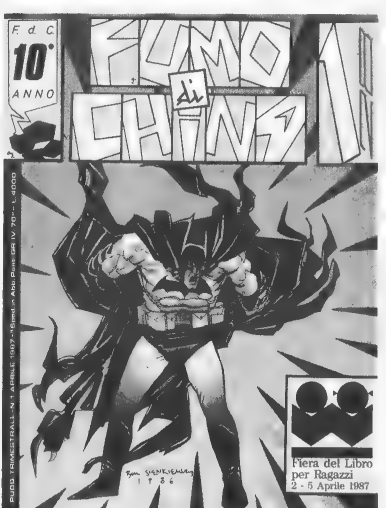
JULIA: *A preincarnation.* (Laughter.) *Do you get CEREBUS?*

MARCO: We have one person that buys it, and I get it even if I don't understand it.

DAK: *Just like everyone else.* (Laughter.)

MARCO: It is difficult for me because it is full of references I don't understand. I like the artwork though.

JULIA: *Did you see the one where you*



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"I get CEREBUS even if I don't understand it."

© 1977-1980 MCG

start reading it and then you have to turn it around, and you turn it and you turn it and you turn it?

MARCO: No.

JULIA: *You just keep turning it around because every panel is put slightly angled from the one before, so it forces you to keep turning the comic around.*

MARCO: No, we don't have it yet. We get comics... we get Marvels three months after they come out in the States, and independents a bit less because they go air mail. Since Marvels and DC's are the biggest part of Titan's income, you can buy them air mail — that is the most expensive — you can buy them sea mail, and you can buy the U.K. distributed issues. We buy the U.K. distributed issues, the ones that are printed by Marvel and by DC for sale in the United Kingdom. They are exactly the same and they just cost less, like 14 pence less than the imports.

DAK: *The one thing that we have been finding out here in Europe is that European countries, even though each country has its own attitude that's very different, but they all seem to be gradually opening up to American comics.*

MARCO: Yeah.

DAK: *And in the States we have been gradually opening up — too slowly, according to some people — to European comics. I think there's this awareness going on internationally —*

MARCO: Yeah.

DAK: *— but the information is still not there. There's not a good communication system to let people get in touch.*

MARCO: Yeah. *(Customer break.)* This *(places a pile of comics in front of DAK)* is something I wanted to show you, the magazine ASTRONAUT.

DAK: *I'm familiar with this because of my years with Marvel, some of them have my material in them. Do you have any that have been translated?*

MARCO: No, this series is only English. I know the guy who translated the old one — I think I have some of your stuff in Italian, all the DEFENDERS stuff.

DAK: *That was printed over here.*

MARCO: Yeah, they had their own monthly book. But Corno was so big that when they folded no one had the money to buy the rights. Marvel has their own agent for all of Europe so we don't work directly with them. We have to work directly with DC because they don't have an agent.

DAK: *DC handles it differently than Marvel?*

MARCO: Yeah, they are very very careful. We have been talking to them for months in order to gain the rights to SUPERMAN, and they still have to decide who they are going to give the rights to. They want someone who will give the *best* exposure, the *best* promotion. In France they have given them to Dargaud, the biggest comics producer.

DAK: *That's interesting because there's always been a sort of a split between the type of material Dargaud publishes versus the type of material that DC Comics publishes; so for Dargaud to publish them is kind of interesting.*

MARCO: Yeah, they are going to for the new SUPERMAN, the new BATMAN. If they are going to give us the rights we will publish them in the same format, MAN OF STEEL and then the other Superman stuff, BATMAN: YEAR ONE and then BATMAN: YEAR TWO and then the new stuff — we start off with the new stories, because since DC stuff hasn't been published for five years there's no point in going back.

DAK: *That's an excellent starting point.*

MARCO: With Marvel we are being obliged to start exactly from the same point Corno stopped five years ago.

DAK: *Then you don't have to worry about ever running out.*

MARCO: No! The fans would have killed us if we skipped one story, they would be *furious* at us. I want to skip all of the fill-ins because there's no point in publishing all of the fill-ins because most of them aren't any good, but they want all of the fill-ins, too!

DAK: *And there's a lot that you already have to choose from here. Last night, we stopped at a newsstand in Venice and we*

"We have a porn star in Parliament."

found the digest-sized porno books, which are just endless titles. (Laughter.) *If I counted correctly from the advertising there are at least eight published every month in every possible specialty, violence, bestiality, the works.*

MARCO: Yeah.

DAK: *And they were not wrapped up, they were just sitting there.*

MARCO: In Italy there are no laws against pornography. No, only the porno with photos. If you are offended by it and you go to the court in your town and say you are offended by the porno mags, then you can have a proceeding to take it off the stands — but no one does it. So pornography is not prohibited. We have a porn star in our Parliament, I don't know have you ever heard about it.

DAK: *No.*

MARCO: You don't know this? Last year a very very famous porno star, an actress called **Ilona Staller** — she's very very popular, she's the star of a weekly magazine that costs $10 called LE ORE, and she stars in what you call fumetti —

DAK: *Right, a series of photographs like a comic book.*

MARCO: — And she has specialized in orgies and stuff, and she's very famous, and she's very nice, rather naive, with long fair blonde hair — and she is so popular that she was presented as a candidate by an extremist left-wing party, and she got so many votes that she was elected! *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *This is fantastic.*

MARCO: The day after the elections there was this . . . a TV talk where every party sent one representative, and they were all like old men and she was there in a stunning green dress, like throwing kisses at the camera. Her program is to sexually stimulate other members of Parliament. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *That's great. Has she been effective so far?*

MARCO: I don't know. But she's been shown in TIME and NEWSWEEK because she made the news. She went to Jerusalem on tour — she has a film where she has intercourse with a snake —

JULIA: *With a* snake?!

MARCO: With a snake, with a cobra. *(Laughter.)* And she went to Jerusalem with her show, and when she went to the Wall of Tears all of the rabbis tried to stop her. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *Well, it's actually a little bit like the U.S. where we, too, have an actor for the president.*

MARCO: Yeah, but in the United States if you betray your wife, like **Gary Hart**, you get thrown out. Here when the

Ilona Staller

magazines asked the politicians about **Gary Hart,** they all said that they envied him because the assumed lover is rather gorgeous. *(Laughter.)*

So there is no law against pornography and many many pornographies have developed in the comics field. There are these digest size black-and-white monthly comics drawn by fourth-rate artists or beginners, and they are all the same, rather boring with hard-core — they show everything. There's only one exception to this, **Magnus. Magnus,** who does other work, has put out 16 porno digests that are so incredible that they make fun out of pornos. They are so popular that they have been reprinted. They are fun. He draws orgies with this incredibly clean, precise style, and it's funny and disgusting and revolting at the same time. But with all this, these porno magazines and these porno comics, there is so much of it but it is not . . . Italy has not gone through the sexual revolution yet, there is not a lot of sex. There are no singles bars or anything, there is repression that way, so we just have a lot of pornography.

DAK: *Feminists would have a field day in Italy.*

MARCO: Yeah, really. There are no singles bars. Most men have their first intercourse . . . no, not *most* men, but *many* men have their first intercourse with prostitutes. Prostitution is not entirely illegal here — they can do things in the home but they can't go out in the street and invite clients over, so they put ads in the newspapers.

DAK: *What you do with your own life is your own business?*

MARCO: Yeah. But it's much more repressed. In America even with the repression in publishing pornographic materials, I think that it's much more like singles bars, one-night stands, and so on, more sex going on, and here it's much much less. There's much more, I don't know . . . frustration. This is just my opinion, of course.

DAK: *Well, there's so much concern in the U.S. about sex and violence, yet essentially there isn't really that much of it — it's more in fiction than in real life. We should do an issue about sex and violence*

A "popular and fun" Magnus panel from STRAGE IN VAGONE LETTO.

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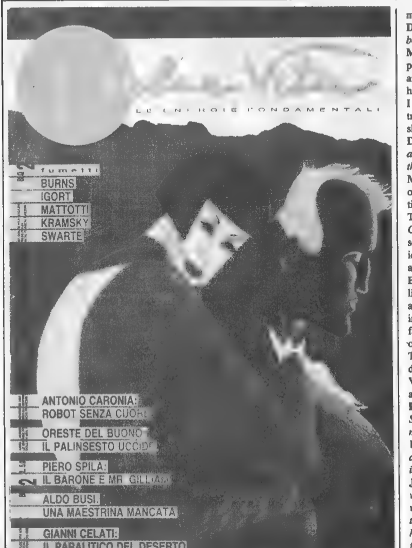
"Russian stuff is very popular, that particular



in Europe, or in Italy. I think people would be amazed at how it is in the rest of the world, or at least certain parts of it.

MARCO: It's very different. France is exactly as we are, they have the same pornos — we sell them pornos, I think. The **Magnus** pornos have been published in France, but these are the exception, these are very very clever pornos because these actually are satire of pornos — it's so *incredible* that you laugh at it!

DAK: *Well, getting back to regular comics, you translate material for Marvel's SPIDER-MAN?*

MARCO: Yeah.

DAK: *How many other Marvel titles are published here?*

MARCO: One, SPIDER-MAN — and CONAN, from another publisher. But this has been going on for seven months and it's so successful that we are going to have a new one, THE FANTASTIC FOUR. THE FANTASTIC FOUR will spin off in their own title with DAREDEVIL as backup, and X-MEN will be SPIDER-MAN's backup.

DAK: *And then maybe you'll spin X-MEN off?*

MARCO: We don't plan to spin X-MEN off because even though X-MEN is very popular, between fans who have been to the States or fans who buy the American comics, they have never had their own series in Italy. X-MEN started off as the backup in CAPTAIN AMERICA — Italian Marvel magazines always have at least two series going on; 48 pages with two stories per issue. We don't have like magazines with one character.

DAK: *So if there is another book you will be translating it as well?*

MARCO: Yeah. I might have another person helping me. I am also studying, I am studying mathematics, so it's like I have this double life — during the week I study math and during the weekends I translate SPIDER-MAN and work for the shop.

DAK: *What are the trends here now? How are comics evolving here? What do you think is the state of comics in Italy?*

MARCO: We have different levels. On one hand the popular magazines are starting to grow a bit more sophisticated. There is the horror Cepim *(pronounced Chepim)* book **DYLAN DOG**, that's more sophisticated in comparison to other comics, and that's very successful. We have a very very avant-garde art group in Bologne called the Valvoline Group, just like the motor oil, and they have very very artsy comics, more image than story, more image oriented. There is more and more fashion in comics because a certain kind of comics is becoming very fashionable. This new magazine that you should definitely buy or see called **DOLCE VITA**, it's like comics and literary articles and fashion reports and everything.

DAK: *Julia was saying — back in the States when she first became international marketing director of COMICS INTERVIEW — she was saying there should be a magazine that combines everything, this is what's going to be happening in comics.*

JULIA: *Music, graphics, art and fashion will just interlink, and I think a lot of the way the graphic field is jumping is more toward the fashion drawing. You can see how GRENDEL has been culled from fashion graphic art, designer sketching.*

MARCO: Yeah, that's it. DOLCE VITA has articles about music, very very sophisticated, very very graphically orientated comics — for example there is this series by an artist called **Igort** that's like the story of the Batman in Russia; it's not really the Batman, he has no identification. Russian stuff is very popular, like that particular kind of graphic, very 1950s, very stark.

DAK: *Bleak.*

MARCO: And at the same time we have an American author, I think, called **Charles Burns** working for DOLCE VITA. I don't know if you have ever heard of him, he is in Italy and he works mainly for Italian and French publishers, and he draws in a style as a pastiche of EC Comics. He does very hard horror stories, very humorous stories. And they have articles about TV, about movies,

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kind of graphics, very 1950s, very stark."

© 1988 Dolce Vita Magazine

about everything. It's a mixture of COMICS INTERVIEW and THE FACE and RAW all pulled together in this very very deluxe package. It's very new.

DAK: *Folks at home, remember, you heard about it first in COMICS INTERVIEW!* (Laughter.)

MARCO: Also we have a few publishing houses that only reprint classic American strips like RIP KIRBY, DICK TRACY, FLASH GORDON, STEVE CANYON, in deluxe editions in very few print runs; I think that they do them on order and if they have like 300 customers then they print maybe 310 copies. We have a big historical perspective about comics, we have lots of histories of comics and encyclopedias of comics. It's normal for a person who knows about comics to know DICK TRACY, for example. DICK TRACY is quite popular, that's one of my favorites, and we have lots of collected editions, hardbound books.

DAK: *Are comics read here mostly by young people, by kids and young adults?*

MARCO: No, everyone reads comics at some point of his life. There are kids who buy MICKEY MOUSE or the adaptations of Japanese cartoons, we have many of them, and then they grow up and they start reading SNOOPY, with lots of games, and then they might start doing superheroes. *Now* they can again but for five years they could not. Then they start reading the Westerns, and then when they grow up they start reading LINUS and COMIC ART and CORTO MALTESE and buying books, and older people mainly buy books and magazines. There are many who buy TEX, for example — the whole run's 324 digest size volumes — it's quite a big collection, I think my brother has all of it but I've never read it.

DAK: *We were very surprized at the television here, they have all of the Japanese cartoons, and they have programs like the old TARZAN TV series and WONDER WOMAN and so forth. We turned on the television in Venice and in the mornings there are all of these superheroes, basically.*

MARCO: Yeah, they run them and they rerun them all of the time, they are very popular. WONDER WOMAN is very popular. We never had the SUPERMAN one, maybe in very regional channels. We have the BATMAN TV show, they run it all of the time.

DAK: *That made me think that American comics would probably be popular here, and I was surprised to find out that DC isn't here and that Marvel has just started again after a five-year gap.*

MARCO: Yes, there was only INDIANA

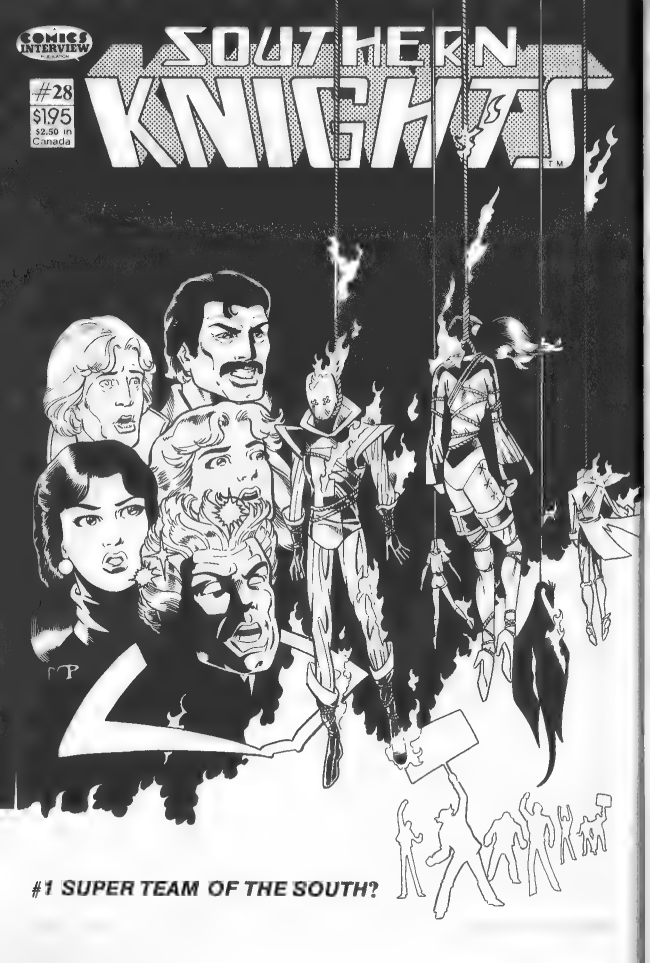
JONES and CONAN from another publisher. But superheroes are very popular here, in fact we were surprised that of our Spider-Man comic, L'UOMO RAGNO, we are selling about 20,000 copies, and for an Italian comic book that's very much.

DAK: *That's something I wanted to ask you, what the circulation of comics were like over here.*

MARCO: Well, you know, there are some comics that are almost a stable in Italian pop culture, MICKEY MOUSE, TEX. I don't know what they sell but they sell a *lot*, maybe 50,000 or 60,000, and maybe more. MICKEY MOUSE definitely sells more because it's sold to children. Another best-seller is DIABOLIK — that's a comic that could never be published in America, because it is the story of a thief and killer who is the hero. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *With X-THIEVES we get letters, like from T.M. Maple — it really bothers him that Fred and Bianca are thieves. And we keep saying, "But it's happy go lucky, it's fun, it's not real life." But he seems to take it very seriously. I don't know if he's ever questioned CONAN, though, and Conan is a thief and a reaver. So, yeah, a comic like DIABOLIK would cause some nervousness.*

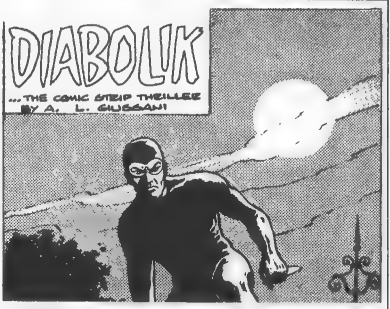
MARCO: Actually **Tony Raiola** is trying to introduce DIABOLIK, I think he has translated the first two issues that were made in the 1950s where criminals were guillotined, and Diabolik escapes being guillotined. It's very violent. I don't like it personally, but it's very popular.


COMICS INTERVIEW
SOUTHERN KNIGHTS
#28
$1.95
$2.50 in Canada
#1 SUPER TEAM OF THE SOUTH?

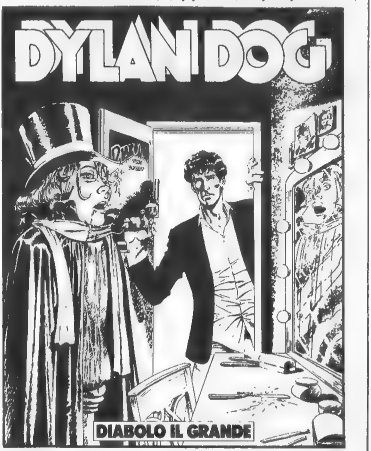
"Italy has not gone through the sexual revolution yet."

© 1988 Astorina Milano, Italy

DAK: *And it's a black-and-white!*
MARCO: It's a black-and-white, *most* Italian comics are in black and white.
DAK: *Yeah, we noticed that.*
MARCO: The *best* Italian publishing house for comics is Cepim. They have mostly Western heroes, and they have one horror comic that's very very popular called DYLAN DOG. It's a very *gory* horror comic, I think that it could never be published in the United States. It has been the first Italian comic, popular comic, advertised in newspapers, and it sells accordingly, it's a very very high seller. And they have an adventure comic called MARTIN MYSTERE.
DAK: *Are they all digest size?*
MARCO: They are — I'll *show* them to you. *(Break in interview while Marco shows DAK and Julia around the shop.)* This is DYLAN DOG.
DAK: *What does that mean in Italian?*
MARCO: Nothing, that's his name! **(Laughter.)**
DAK: *I like that.*
MARCO: Yeah. He's a British horror detective that gets into the most gory and horrible things all over London, and it's the biggest amount of gore I've ever seen. In the annual — they have annuals just like in America, they have summer specials — and in this year's special it was all about the Loch Ness Monster and it was very very strong. That's MARTIN MYSTERE. That's the "**Alan Moore** style" Western title, "Detective of the Impossible," and it's all about the mysteries of real life like Stonehenge and Eastern mysticism and stuff.
JULIA: *Metaphysical mysteries.*
MARCO: Some of them are really really popular stuff, very very low level . . . I don't know . . . like an average Marvel title. Some of them are rather artsy. The graphic novels TUTTOWEST are all colored in watercolors.
DAK: *There seems to be a lot of interest in stories of the West here.*
MARCO: Yeah, it's the bestselling genre.
DAK: *In the States every time they try to do anything on the West, right down it goes.*
MARCO: Yeah, but here it's so popular, unbelievably popular. There's TUTTOWEST and there's TEX and there's ZAGOR and there's TUTTOZAGOR that's a reprint.
DAK: *What does TUTTO mean?*
MARCO: "Old."
DAK: *Ah. What does ZAGOR mean?*
MARCO: "Whole."
DAK: *And TEX is the most popular one?*
MARCO: It is maybe *the* most popular Italian comic, but not for kids — for kids



it's MICKEY MOUSE, after MICKEY MOUSE there's TEX. Some of the TEX issues are great. There was a series of horror mixed with TEX, when Tex met the son of the Devil; those were the only issues that I personally liked, maybe because I read lots of American comics and don't care as much about Western stuff. And the next one — this is all of the popular stuff, stuff you buy at newsstands,



© 1988 Dumi Press

"There are many pornographic

and every kind of newsstand carries comics.

DAK: *Does the same artist do all of TEX?*

MARCO: No. They do it the same way they do in America . . . not *exactly* the same way, the continuity is very weak. The only one with real continuity is KEN PARKER. All of the other ones have the same situation all over, they never age, never change, never get married.

DAK: *It's just another adventure.*

MARCO: Yeah, because that's the key to success in Italian comics, to be like MICKEY MOUSE in a sense, always the same. DIABOLIK is always the same, it's been working for 20 years — every month he kills someone, he steals something, he has the same girlfriend, Eva, and they never get married. *(Laughter.)* And every episode ends the same way, they kiss and they drive away with their Porsche — they have always the same car, they have always the same clothes. It's like it's stuck in the 1960s.

DAK: *Do DIABOLIK and TEX sell at about the same level?*

MARCO: Yeah. I have no idea about the actual quantities but I *assume* that they must be 50,000. That's a lot! Maybe it's more like 80,000!

JULIA: *That's monthly?*

MARCO: That's monthly. We also have quality magazines like CORTO MALTESE and COMIC ART and LINUS and DOLCE VITA. All of these magazines publish quality art by major Italian and European artists; they are all monthlies made by different publishers, they have serialized stories, and the most successful ones of them are collected in graphic novels, the same way France works. CORTO MALTESE, for example, publishes "Corto Maltese" episodes and then they collect them in graphic novels. They publish **Manara,** the erotic artist — that's not really erotic for us, but for you that maybe is. It's soft-core for us, everyone can buy it. **Manara** was first published in episodes in CORTO MALTESE for one year and then was collected in a volume called INDIAN SUMMER, which has been published in America.

DAK: *Yeah.*

MARCO: And now there is another story, and they are *all* collected in volumes. And they publish JEFF HAWKE, it's very strange science-fiction stuff, very popular in Italy, *incredibly* popular in Italy, by a British author who is completely unknown in England.

DAK: *What's his name?*

MARCO: His name is **Sidney Jordan.** In Italy he is so popular that his work has been published in a series of 20 hardbound volumes that have been reprinted time and time again. No one knows him in England. I met him at the UKCAC this summer, in London, and he was so happy to see me because I was the only person who knew who he was. *(Laughter.)*

DAK: *What is the series about?*

MARCO: This is a science-fiction series . . . Actually there are two volumes in English that Titan put out, but they haven't sold at all because it's too far from the American genre. It's the story of this pilot that works for the RAF and he's involved in all kinds of extraterrestrial activity on Earth, and he solves all of the metaphysical mysteries and is very energetic, and the aliens are very . . . I don't have this word in English — sympatico. They are incredible.

DAK: *Does he write these in Italian?*

MARCO: No, they are translated. They first came out in THE DAILY MIRROR, but no one cares about them. The only existing collection of his work is in Italian, these are all translations. It's like very heavy duty science fiction, very classical, and sometimes also erotic, and it's very very popular here. The aliens are very famous because they are very strange looking and they are like *(pounds counter)* very *arrogant* extraterrestrials! *(Laughter.)*

JULIA: *Is this published at all in a strip form, in a newspaper?*

MARCO: No.

JULIA: *So that isn't where it got its following from.*

MARCO: No no no. The following . . . Maybe we should talk about the history of Italian comics. The *first* Italian comics got started in the beginning of the century and at first they didn't even have balloons! Even American comics were changed, the balloons were erased and text was added below the panels.

DAK: *Like PRINCE VALIANT.*

MARCO: Exactly. FLASH GORDON

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comics, it's a healthy industry."

© Editrice Squalo S.R.I

Italian comics range from quality (CORTO MALTESE) to "dirty digests" to erotic quality (Milo Manara).

was incredibly popular. All of the American stuff, RIP KIRBY, FLASH GORDON, STEVE CANYON — most Italians know and love comics from comic strips — TARZAN; most of the American strips have been collected, for example there is a very very *good* collection of TARZAN material from the dailies. This was from ten or fifteen years ago and they are still in print, they still sell them! And MICKEY MOUSE was *very* popular.

Then when **Mussolini** was in power he. prohibited American comics *except* MICKEY MOUSE, because **Mussolini's** son was one of the biggest fans of MICKEY MOUSE. There were letters by the son of **Mussolini** in MICKEY MOUSE. So the only one to continue was MICKEY MOUSE. But Italian publishers kind of circumvented this ban and continued to publish FLASH GORDON and all of the American strips by *changing* the names of the authors and by changing the names of the strips. For example **Alex Raymond's** FLASH GORDON, his name was different and they changed the name of the strip, but it was still **Alex Raymond's** FLASH GORDON and it was published. After the War the strips were still very popular, there are stories of huge queues at newsstands when L'AVVENTUROSO came out, which was a weekly that was *huge* size, like newspaper size, that published DICK TRACY and all of them.

JULIA: *What does L'AVVENTUROSO mean?*

MARCO: "The Adventurer — the Lover of Adventure." So most Italians know comic strips. Then in 1965 the first quality magazine with comics was published, it was called LINUS. It's still going on nowadays but it's more politically oriented than comics oriented.

DAK: *I wondered why at the newsstand it was shrink-wrapped in plastic.*

MARCO: Because there is a gift inside.

DAK: *Is that it? I thought it was meant for nobody to look at —*

MARCO: No no no. They are wrapped only if there is a gift or something that might get lost. Only pornography is wrapped all of the time.

DAK: *Well, we found some of that that wasn't — but I guess in comics they don't consider it to be pornography?*

MARCO: No, not really.

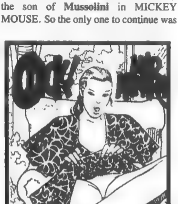
DAK: *Only if it's photographs?*

MARCO: Photography is pornography. In comics — there are many many pornographic comics, it's a healthy industry.

Manara, for example, he started off working in the pornos.

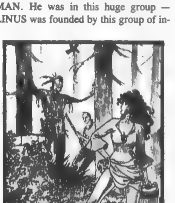
DAK: *Well, I didn't mean to sidetrack you from the history.*

MARCO: Yeah. For example **Umberto Eco,** the author of THE NAME OF THE ROSE — a very famous book, they made a movie out of it — he's a very very big comics fan, he has a very big collection, he has written essays about **Milton Caniff,** about MICKEY MOUSE, about SUPERMAN. He was in this huge group — LINUS was founded by this group of in-



Milo Manara
CLICK!

© 1988 Editions Albin Michel (CLICK)



Milo Manara/Hugo Pratt
INDIAN SUMMER

© 1986 Milo Manara, Hugo Pratt

CHRISTMAS WITH SUPERSWINE

COMING THIS DECEMBER (WHEN ELSE?)

WRITTEN & ILLUSTRATED BY
GARY FIELDS

FANTAGRAPHICS BOOKS

"Eroticism is very common in Italy in comics."

tellectuals in 1965, and this magazine contained American humor strips like PEANUTS and BC and WIZARD OF ID and old Segar POPEYEs, combined with articles about books, about politics — it was very left-wing.

DAK: *So LINUS takes its name from the PEANUTS character?*

MARCO: Yes, from PEANUTS. In ~2 there was an episode of JEFF HAWKE and that's how it started, because fans *loved* it! It's very ordered, it's not childish in any way, it's written so it doesn't insult the reader's intelligence. After a few years Milano Libri, the publisher of LINUS, started collecting JEFF HAWKE strips in hardbound volumes, and they are still doing them — there's a new volume that came out just a few weeks ago — and they are very popular.

And beside popular comics, which we've talked about, beside porn comics, beside these monthly magazines with serials from all over, we have also deluxe productions like GLAMOUR for which Sienkiewicz has worked, for which Dave Stevens has worked. GLAMOUR has a very very limited print run and it's *extremely* expensive because it is state of the art production, it's mainly pictures, and it's in three languages, Italian, French, and English — I think I should show them to you because it's very very erotic. Eroticism is very common in Italy in comics. *(Leaves briefly, returns with some issues of GLAMOUR.)*

DAK: *Ah — "Black Women and Jungle Girls" it says on the cover — GLAMOUR INTERNATIONAL.*

JULIA: *How much is that?*

MARCO: It's around $16 or $20. It's bimonthly and it has very very strange stuff, and they ask cartoonists to interpret an erotic theme. And they have photos.

DAK: (Paging through an issue.) *You know, one thing that Italian distributors have nothing to fear is that American distributors will ever invade this market.* (Laughter.)

MARCO: They sell that in the States.

DAK: *But there are direct market retailers and distributors who would literally have a heart attack if they saw this material. Do you know the issue of COMICS INTERVIEW we did with the Frazetta painting on the front?*

MARCO: Frazetta issue, yeah.

DAK: *There actually were shops that refused to display that issue and wrapped it up and hid it behind the counter and only if people asked for it would they sell it to them, and that's just a simple nude painting.*

JULIA: *And it still sold out in a week and they ordered more.*

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"That's the key to success in Italian comics, to

DAK: *Yeah, but a painting is not a photograph.*

MARCO: They have also articles and editorials — this is **Pazienza,** a very famous Italian author that is completely unknown in the States, very quality artsy. This is **Cadelo,** he's an Italian and he's very famous in France as well. This is **Munoz** from SINNER, who **Keith Giffen** swipes all of the time. **(Laughter.)** This is **Steranko!** And this is **Frollo,** he is a porn author.

JULIA: *I like the cactus, very phallic.* (Laughter.)

DAK: *And here's* Dave Stevens.

MARCO: Yeah, Dave Stevens. And they also have strips.

DAK: *There's BLONDIE, there's bondage — and here's our Frazetta cover! Right here live in GLAMOUR #10!* (Laughter.) *This is the cover that drove us behind the counter and it's just one painting in this magazine.*

JULIA: *I just want to skip back to one thing: One of the things we noticed here on TV were the computer graphics, on every station wherever they can squeeze a computer graphic in —*

MARCO: Yeah, people love it.

JULIA: *Has that hit the comics market yet? Are there people doing computerized graphic comics?*

MARCO: No. I know about the American things, but no one has done them here. There's a big interest now in Bologne — until yesterday there was this show about computer graphics called THE ELECTRONIC IMAGE with talk shows and movies, and at the Museum of Modern Art there was an exhibition about videos and special effects in the movies.

DAK: *Well, there's more computerized graphics on the networks here than on the networks in the U.S. — that's what we noticed.*

JULIA: *Yeah, and we've just been through Belgium and Germany and France and Austria and we didn't see anything like what you have here.*

MARCO: Yeah, the one who started . . . in Italy we have three state owned channels without ads inside the programs, and we have lots of networks, private networks, and sometimes the private networks are even better than state TV, but state TV is more popular because Italians *hate* commercials in the show so they'd rather watch *anything* on state TV than on private TV. And on state TV, like three years ago they went to England and they had this incredible station identification short with computer art, this three-dimensional object that flies through space and inside it shows the name of the channel — it's very impressive — and then all of the private networks imitated that. It's state of the art computer animation and it's incredible.

JULIA: *Yes, it seems to be really at the high level.*

MARCO: Yeah, for example — I don't know if it's the same in the States — but all of the news programs use computer art a lot, like the image fades and then it shrinks and then it grows back another image and we have the next segment coming up, and stuff like that.

DAK: *Yeah, in the States they have — which we always laugh at — so-called "live radar," which is just a very primitive computer graphic. It's laughable because it's not really radar and it's not even a good computer graphic, but they spend a lot of time bragging about it. Over here we saw the weather report with absolutely everything generated on computer —*

MARCO: Yeah, it's all animated.

JULIA: *And all the rain coming down, how it was going to sweep across the country, you really got a picture of what was actually going to happen.*

DAK: *And they showed which cities would get missed, which would get it now and which would get it later, which would get thunderstorms.*

MARCO: Yeah, and they show how the day will evolve through 24 hours with a clock going on.

DAK: *We have not seen anything of that*

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PER SAPERE TUTTO SUL FUMETTO

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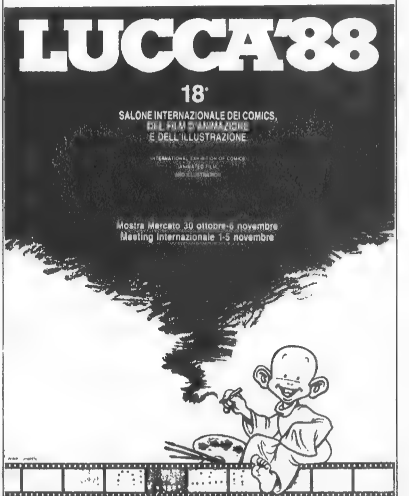
be like MICKEY MOUSE, always the same."

advanced a degree in any other country.
MARCO: On that point maybe we are more forward.
JULIA: *The rest of the world has something to look forward to.*
DAK: *I wanted to ask, of the quality magazines which is the most popular?*
MARCO: COMIC ART I think is maybe the best-seller, maybe more than CORTO MALTESE, in quality mags. Sales on quality mags are very very low, but I can't tell you anything because they change very much, but maybe 10,000. COMIC ART is run by the same person who organizes the Lucca Convention, the biggest Italian convention and one of the biggest in the world. I don't know if you've ever heard about it?
DAK: *Oh, yeah.*
JULIA: *We're going down to Lucca from here, to see the city.*
MARCO: There are bigger conventions, although Lucca is more important from an historical point of view. It started in 1966 and is very important because it's a wholly global thing and there are people from all over the world. The board of Lucca is made up of American people, European people, third world people, people from Yugoslavia, and they have a cartoon section that's very important, and they have art exhibitions and talk shows — it's very international.

I went to the UKCAC this summer and it was quite nice but you could see that the whole point was very limited because everyone was from American comics or British comics. There was no talking about what's going on all over the world. During one panel about the future of comics someone *incidentally* mentioned that there were comics outside the English speaking world — *(Laughter.)* I think it was **Paul Gravett**, because **Paul Gravett** had been publishing Italian comics and French comics in ESCAPE — but the audience was quite surprised!

In Lucca in one day you can have a talk show about American superheroes and politics, and have a talk about the new work by the Italian publishing house run by priests — they do stories of saints and some of them are really good, but most of them are just propaganda — and we might have a talk about comics in Algeria, have a talk about the new work by **Hugo Pratt,** and so on. It's eight days and it's paid for, most of it, by the town council. Town councils organize most going-ons here. The Lucca convention is organized by the town council, but there is also a board of directors that is international.
JULIA: *Would you say the angle at Lucca is more for the artists to promote themselves, and more for the comics field, or more for publishers to mix and pick up ideas and properties and so on?*
MARCO: In Lucca on one side you have artists meeting with each other and having talk shows, and you have publishers from all over the world meeting and talking — it's really for everyone. It's pretty important for publishers, people go there to work, to get contracts, to show stuff. At the same time it's very good on the fan level. On the last day they give awards in this incredible last century's theatre — no, older — in this *old* theatre. Last time they gave nice award prize to **Will Eisner. Will Eisner** is incredibly popular here, they are publishing **THE SPIRIT** now and it's very popular, it's selling a lot. **Will Eisner** was awarded like the Life For Comics Award and the theatre was *roaring* with clapping! Everyone loves him.

And then there is this party at the end where you have *everyone*, all of the publishers, all of the artists, everyone. It's really like this melting pot for people from all over the world. It's a very nice experience because you really see comics as whole, no distinction. You can talk about what's happening in France or America or Italy or wherever and it's like we're all talking the same language, the language of art. It's like you can see comics as a global village. *(Dramatic invocation.)* I would never miss a Lucca! *(Laughter.)*



Unfortunately, Marco (and everyone else) will miss Lucca '88 — as we go to press, word is that it's cancelled.

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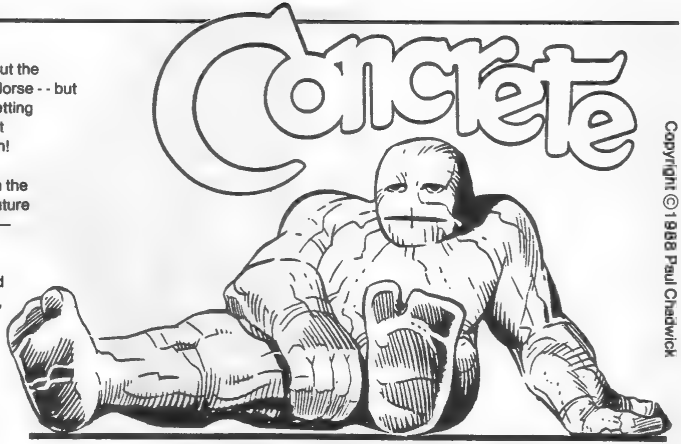

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DAVID ANTHONY KRAFT'S

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LAST WORD

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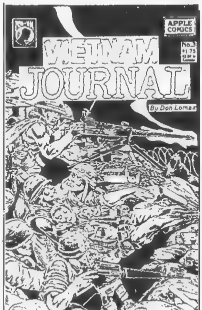
AN OPEN LETTER TO THE COMICS INDUSTRY

Folks:

I am a new and rather minuscule retailer in the Chicago area. As my business has gotten off to a slow start I've been wracking my brain trying to think of ploys to bring in new customers, and I hit upon the idea of a form of telemarketing. Originally I'd planned to call people in my area and ask whether anyone in the household reads comics; if there was someone I'd pitch my business, if not I'd just thank them for their time. A friend of mine, also a retailer (but not of comic books) suggested that I not let non-comics readers off the hook so fast. Since I did have a viable product which in theory would be accepted by a much larger consumer group if only they can be properly introduced to it, why not hold onto them a little longer and try to convince them to take a look? Seeing the logic in this I wrote a second spiel aimed at someone who wasn't really familiar with comics but who probably had preconceptions about them. I explained that comics today often dealt with mature themes and appealed to a wide variety of interests. I then attempted to organize a list of comics I'd recommend depending on my prospective client's interests...and that's



where I ran into trouble. Once I got past science fiction, fantasy and super-heroes I found it almost impossible to continue my list. This is what prompted me to write this letter.

As a corollary to all the recent arguments about labels and censorship there is a second, underlying notion that comics are now dramatically expanding in adult markets. Many have greeted as a revelation the fact that in other countries there are comics that are read by the majority of the population (LONE WOLF AND CUB in Japan, for example), and there is much talk about being on the verge of an imminent breakthrough to that effect here.

But where *are* all these adult oriented mainstream comics? By "mainstream" I mean entertainment accessible to (and hopefully desired by a all, non-artsy, not dwelling within a genre representing the interests of only a small percentage of the population (or at least a selection diverse enough to cover a number of such genres).

Compare comics with other visual storytelling media; TV and film. For every science-fiction type film or series there are many domestic comedies, dramas, non-superheroic action films, etc. Also keep in mind the scope of comics: being relatively small they are more comparable to television than to movies. Whereas a sci-fi or vigilante-type blockbuster will draw millions to theaters just on the strength of spectacle, sci-fi TV shows have traditionally been doomed. The number of successful sci-fi TV shows can be counted on the fingers of one hand despite

Vietnam Journal #5

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countless entries in the field, especially those aimed specifically at an adult audience (thereby eliminating such fairly successful entries as LOST IN SPACE and VOYAGE TO THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA). The fact that such shows have such a short life span despite building in many cases a very vocal cult following is testimony to just how small a segment of the population these advocates represent (any argument that these failures might be due to poor writing could be countered by applying the same argument (let's face it) to comic books; or, more pointedly, that argument could be applied to other highly successful non-sci-fi TV shows!).

In point of fact, the enjoyment of sci-fi and especially superheroes requires a monumental suspension of disbelief, more so than a great number of people are evidentally willing or able to do with much regularity. Plus there is by now a 50-year old stigma involved: the average adult considers the very concept of the super-hero (by which I mean masked or unmasked vigilante in any of its various guises and ramifications) to be childish and unworthy of serious attention. And as a consumer group by *thinking* so they *make* it so. No amount of nudity or bloodshed will elevate the superhero to the status of adult entertainment. To the majority of the

populace a superhero book with nudity is merely a children's book which children shouldn't be allowed to read: a medium without an audience.

To make matters worse, in looking over so-called "adult" comics, I find many creators guilty of not understanding the difference between a truly adult theme and the words "adults only." When I was a kid an adult movie was one I was occasionally forced to cry or sleep through (due to restlessness or boredom in not being able to appreciate the subtleties), reactions I most likely would not have had if I'd been confronted with a porn flick! Hmmm . . . given my naivete back in those days I wonder what my reaction *would* have been?

Mind you, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with science fiction, or even super-heroes. If I didn't like them I wouldn't be in this business, and neither would most of you, but that just may be the point. Most of the current comic book creators grew up with comics, developing a super-hero mind-set, of sorts. That's why they're in the business. They long ago discovered the secret that super-heroes (and certainly science fiction) aren't necessarily just kids stuff. They have achieved admirable advances in the maturation of the art form. However, whether it be the fault of the creators, editors or publishers, the fact remains that this ingrained mind-set is drastically limiting the potential audience.

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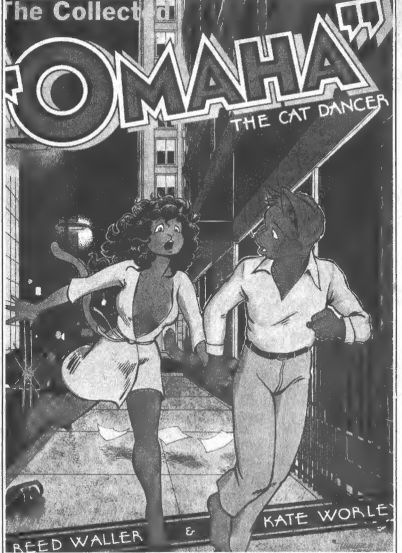
For all the talk of being on the verge of expanding the adult market I have yet to see any real diversification of adult subject matter. Look through a monthly order form from any distributor, or even through an AMAZING HEROES PREVIEW SPECIAL, and try to find the mainstream non-special interest adult comics. As I said before, by "mainstream" I mean non-artsy: no "CENTRIFUGAL BUMBLE-PUPPY," no pseudo-undergrounds, etc., comics just for the sake of (or, better, comics that fill the niche of) easily assimilated entertainment (we *are* using TV as a comparison, no? This is not to infer that the stuff has to be trash; even television has come up with some real gems over the years). By "special interest" I mean comics inhabiting a *very* limiting genre: no sci-fi or super-heroes (there goes half the list without even having to think about it!), no funny animals (there goes most of the other half, including OMAHA, the favorite pick lately of anyone trying to show how "adult" comics have become. I don't dispute this, but wake up, guys! The average adult with fixed ideas about comics being childish isn't going to look seriously at a book that features anthropomorphism!... Might take it to the bathroom, though...), no hip-punk-radicalism (there goes LOVE AND ROCKETS). What's left? A couple of war comics (THE NAM and VIETNAM JOURNAL) which, though another genre, I'll admit as being at least an alternative genre to the overwhelming sci-fi/fantasy-horror one. Romance? Adult comedy? What acceptable mainstream adult fare is left?

(Of course I simplify here, as I have throughout this letter. I grant that you'll be able to think of other worthy titles, but how many? A mere half-a-handful of titles is not going to change the way America looks at comics! Besides, I'm not done cutting down the list yet!)

You might include a relative handful of specials and graphic novels perhaps, but it is hard to believe that exposure to a single special edition will suddenly enamour an audience to comic books in general. It would be looked upon as an exception, a one-shot, a freak... which is exactly what it is! It is my contention that the only way to capture a much wider audience to comics in general would be to have more "general" (i.e. regularly published) comic books aimed at a wider audience, and dealing with more diverse themes. Not only don't these books exist right now, but I see nothing to indicate any real effort towards putting these books out in the foreseeable future.

Also, these books must be readily available to the average adult. A non-comics reader isn't likely to wander into



a comic shop, so direct sales titles, regardless of content, aren't going to make a dent in the adult market, either (take *those* away and how does your list of adult titles look now?!). Hell, most people don't even visit bookstores very often; their weekly reading is picked up at the supermarket checkout! (What's that you say? Tabloid readers aren't the kind of people you're trying to reach? Then what's all this talk about getting a *large* part of the population to read comics?)

The solution, as I see it, would have to be a two-pronged attack: producing such books and making them easily available in the first place, and undertaking a mass publicity effort geared at maximum exposure to an audience who wouldn't normally see or be interested in locating information about comics. Free mailings? TV and magazine ads? (Telemarketing?) Perhaps even a free first issue! All this would be expensive to any one publisher. But a concerted and unified effort on the part of a few publishers could pay dividends to all.

As for creators, what may be needed for this diversification is to find writers (more so than artists, I think) whose main aspirations lie outside the comics milieux, people without the super-hero mind-set, even those who believe that comics are childish. Fine! Assuming that comics *could* be a viable art form if they weren't childish, write one that isn't!

It's all fine and good to talk about reaching a wider adult audience, but until someone puts their money where their mouths are, it's just idle talk.

With apologies to everyone I've just alienated,

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